A GLORIOUS REBIRTH IN BRISBANE

SANSKRIT WITH A PERSIAN ACCENT

THE ONSCREEN PORTRAIT OF CASTE

www.openthemagazine.com

OPEN

1 FEBRUARY 2021 / ₹50

JOE BIDEN

A NORMAL PRESIDENT

BIDEN THE CIVIL BY TUNKU VARADARAJAN

THE FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGE BY BRAHMA CHELLANEY

THE DREAM WORK OF AMERICA BY VINAY LAL

VISIT…

RP-Sanjiv Goenka Group

spencer's

EVERY BUY IS ESSENTIAL

COOLERS TO PILLOWS

FRUITS TO JUICERS

GROCERIES TO CROCKERIES

SHOWER GELS TO TOWELS

BEVERAGES TO FREEZERS

DETERGENTS TO GARMENTS

TO ORDER & GET DELIVERY AT YOUR DOORSTEP

ORDER ONLINE www.spencers.in/app

9007470000

CONTENTS

1 FEBRUARY 2021

5 **LOCOMOTIF**
The name of the normal
By S Prasannarajan

6 **INDRAPRASTHA**
By Virendra Kapoor

8 **MUMBAI NOTEBOOK**
By Anil Dharker

14 **SOFT POWER**
Nivedita's anguish
By Makarand R Paranjape

16 **OPINION**
Nawabs of negativity
By Minhaz Merchant

18 **THE RACHEL PAPERS**
May the road rise up to meet you
By Rachel Dwyer

26 **WHISPERER**
By Jayanta Ghosal

28 **OPEN ESSAY**
Sanskrit with a Persian accent
By Audrey Truschke

'THIS IS AMERICA'S DAY'

GETTY IMAGES

34 **BIDEN THE CIVIL**
There is a sense of a great national cleansing and realignment
By Tunku Varadarajan

40 **A NEW UNCERTAINTY**
The momentum towards deeper US-India strategic collaboration could slow if Joe Biden's foreign policy returns to an accommodationist approach towards China
By Brahma Chellaney

48 **THE CARETAKER PRESIDENT**
Joe Biden has been chosen to set the stage for the next generation of Democrats
By Keerthik Sasidharan

52 **MADAM VEEP**
Kamala Harris is fierce, confident, a role model for women of colour and a trailblazer who hasn't stopped blazing
By Kaveree Bamzai

56 **THE DREAM WORK OF AMERICA**
The myth of the indispensable nation
By Vinay Lal

64 **THE WHITE TIGERS**
Hindi movies that talk directly about caste oppression are still rare. Despite rampant self-censorship, that might be changing
By Kaveree Bamzai

70 **A MOVEABLE FEAST**
The Indian masala magic
By Shylashri Shankar

72 **STARGAZER**
By Kaveree Bamzai

Cover Photograph Getty Images

EDITOR S Prasannarajan
MANAGING EDITOR PR Ramesh
EXECUTIVE EDITOR Ullekh NP
EDITOR-AT-LARGE Siddharth Singh
DEPUTY EDITORS Madhavankutty Pillai (Mumbai Bureau Chief), Rahul Pandita, Amita Shah, V Shoba (Bangalore), Nandini Nair
CREATIVE DIRECTOR Rohit Chawla
ART DIRECTOR Jyoti K Singh
SENIOR EDITORS Sudeep Paul, Lhendup Gyatso Bhutia (Mumbai), Moinak Mitra, Nikita Doval
ASSOCIATE EDITOR Vijay K Soni (Web)
ASSISTANT EDITOR Vipul Vivek
CHIEF OF GRAPHICS Saurabh Singh
SENIOR DESIGNERS Anup Banerjee, Veer Pal Singh
PHOTO EDITOR Raul Irani
DEPUTY PHOTO EDITOR Ashish Sharma

NATIONAL HEAD-EVENTS AND INITIATIVES Arpita Sachin Ahuja
AVP (ADVERTISING) Rashmi Lata Swarup
GENERAL MANAGERS (ADVERTISING) Uma Srinivasan (South)

NATIONAL HEAD-DISTRIBUTION AND SALES Ajay Gupta
REGIONAL HEADS-CIRCULATION D Charles (South), Melvin George (West), Basab Ghosh (East)
HEAD-PRODUCTION Maneesh Tyagi
SENIOR MANAGER (PRE-PRESS) Sharad Tailang
MANAGER-MARKETING Priya Singh
CHIEF DESIGNER-MARKETING Champak Bhattacharjee

CFO & HEAD-IT Anil Bisht

CHIEF EXECUTIVE & PUBLISHER Neeraja Chawla

All rights reserved throughout the world. Reproduction in any manner is prohibited.
Editor: S Prasannarajan. Printed and published by Neeraja Chawla on behalf of the owner, Open Media Network Pvt Ltd. Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd, 18-35 Milestone, Delhi Mathura Road, Faridabad-121007, (Haryana).
Published at 4, DDA Commercial Complex, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi-110017.
Ph: (011) 48500500; Fax: (011) 48500599

To subscribe, WhatsApp 'openmag' to 9999800012 or log on to www.openthemagazine.com or call our Toll Free Number 1800 102 7510 or email at: customercare@openmedianetwork.in
For alliances, email alliances@openmedianetwork.in
For advertising, email advt@openmedianetwork.in
For any other queries/observations, email feedback@openmedianetwork.in

Disclaimer
'Open Avenues' are advertiser-driven marketing initiatives and *Open* assumes no responsibility for content and the consequences of using products or services advertised in the magazine

Volume 13 Issue 4
For the week 26 January-1 February 2021
Total No. of pages 74

OPEN MAIL

editor@openmedianetwork.in

LETTER OF THE WEEK

The journey of vaccines is going to commence in a big way ('A Shot of Hope', January 25th, 2021). In rolling out its mass vaccination programme, India is expected to make a big breakthrough in making its population immune to the effects of the coronavirus. A lot of research was fast-tracked during the pandemic and we hope to see light at the end of this tunnel in the new year. Serum Institute has a huge responsibility in ensuring India's programme succeeds. The Government's plans are also underway to make our own *desi* 'shot of hope' a success. Indian researchers have been working hard through the pandemic and within our resource constraints. Along with the state, both the doctors and the frontline workers will once again be the warriors in this war against the virus as well as in making our big dream of an indigenous vaccine come true. Moreover, the Indian government machinery has approached the pandemic very judiciously and it is now up to us to cooperate in this effort for our own safety as well as to help the Indian research establishment reach new heights. This is not just a 'shot of hope' but also a bet of, for and on hope.

CK Subramaniam

SMALL STEPS

We have just begun our small steps in the long journey of administering vaccines to all our citizens ('A Shot of Hope', January 25th, 2021). Even if we take 60-70 per cent of the population which is to be inoculated for developing herd immunity, it is still a tall order. Given our abysmal record in delivering public healthcare infrastructure, it is all the more critical for government and administration to provide all support possible to get this task done seamlessly. Supply chain management and the provision of vaccines to all those who cannot afford it would be the biggest tasks. Many neighbouring countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh are also expecting us to help them out with vaccines, so we would be under pressure to live up to their expectations too. Last but never the least, it should be the choice of an individual which vaccine, between Covaxin and Covishield, they want.

Bal Govind

India's huge population of 136 crore makes it even worse that we are No 2 by the number of Covid cases. And then there's the looming threat of the second wave. Government at the Centre as well as the state level must provide all necessary support for distribution, administration and preservation of the two vaccines, of which one is still in trial mode. Coordination between agencies involved in the vaccination drive

is amust if we are not to slip into the usual red tape. All stakeholders, including those who will be vaccinated, should work hand-in-hand for the safety and wellbeing of one and all. Rumour mongering, negative campaigning and attempts to play up real or purported side effects as major impediment must be dealth with strictly. We have just won the first part of the battle against the coronavirus. We have succeeded to slow the spread of Covid so far. With the vaccines in our hands, it is time to eradicate it.

Chanchal Nandy

COLD FACT

The chilling partisanship of America lays bare the true nature of any method of societal governance ('After the insurrection' by James Astill, January 25th, 2021). There is no American exceptionalism, only the cold fact that human organisations are fraught with weakness owing to their association with humans themselves. Until we have *Homo Sapiens* 2.0, these outcomes will recur here, there and everywhere.

T Snyder

By S PRASANNARAJAN

THE NAME OF THE NORMAL

Biden time in American politics

A NEW ADJECTIVE IS haunting the shaken citadel of democracy and its name is 'normal'. There are times when, in nations rattled by the raw force of change, consolation comes from the familiar, and a cliché becomes more reassuring than lofty reminders from history. The normal has a remarkable elasticity about it. It can be adjusted by expediency and circumstances to accommodate anything we once took for granted, anything that was recently abandoned by the usurpers of democracy. The normal, after the shattering experience of reinvention, is a celebration of the pre-existing order. The adjective has regained its home in the presidency of Joe Biden. Even we at *Open* couldn't resist it on the cover of this issue.

The new president's inaugural speech itself was a masterpiece of normalcy: the beauty of banality could not have resonated more across a nation used to the staccato savagery of the angry president and the evangelical cadence of the poetic president during the past 12 years. The speech, delivered with the folksy intimacy of a man who has been through it all, was about Rebuilding America on the ruins of the Trump era. This is democracy's day, he said, this is America's day. Let's start afresh, let's put truth above lies and he told Americans that he would put his whole soul in the project of unity and justice. He reached no rhetorical summit; he provided no quote for posterity; he was talking to a people in words borrowed from the used books of platitudes. The normal is restoration, even if the words are mostly spent on rebuilding.

In Biden's case, it's the restoration of the Obama raj minus his poetry. On Inauguration Day, the television cameras couldn't get enough of the Obamas, the undisputed stars among the guests, and deservedly so. The Biden agenda, the agenda of MANA (Make America Normal Again), has very little Biden in it. What it has in abundance is an admixture of un-Trumpism and Obamaism. He is defined by the context of his political life—a long-serving member of the establishment—rather than by an individual text. The Obama years provided a necessary contrast, as chosen by Obama himself: he was the safe—and a bit stale—prose against Obama's lofty poetry (power diminished the poetry a bit, but it's back now.) The grey beltway veteran provided the solidity the poet in power needed.

Obama shows his affection and admiration for his friend Joe in his memoirs, *A Promised Land*: "As for Joe, we couldn't have been more different, at least on paper. He was nineteen years my senior. I was running as the Washington outsider; Joe had spent thirty-five years in the Senate...In contrast to my peripatetic upbringing, Joe had deep roots in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and took pride in his working-class Irish heritage...And if I was seen as temperamentally cool and collected, measured in how I used my words, Joe was all warmth, a man without inhibitions, happy to share whatever popped into his head...Joe's enthusiasm had its downside. In a town filled with people who liked to hear themselves talk, he had no peer...As I came to know Joe, though, I found his occasional gaffes to be trivial compared to his strengths...Most of all, Joe had heart."

Biden is here for what Obama had stood for, and the only unanswered question is whether the progressives will succeed in radicalising the vintage Establishmentarian. Which also means: Biden is here for making America un-Trump again. Being not Trump made him the counter-candidate of the campaign: set against Trump's Twitter storm, his silence was a profound cultural statement. He didn't even have to campaign much; he just had to remain the oracular wise old man in his Delaware bunker. The ravings of the mad king did the work for him. His normalcy was magnified by the madness of the other. In power, erasing four years of Trump means repairing the badly dented legacy of his former boss, who was far from being a normal candidate when he stormed America in 2008. So was Trump, anything but normal when the outlandish outsider 'stole' the show in 2016.

After such historical shifts, Biden exudes the quiet power of the ordinary. Evan Osnos in his *Joe Biden: American Dreamer*, a book born out of his extensive reportage for *The New Yorker*, is moved by the man's empathy with other men who can cry. "Joe Biden's life," he writes, "was replete with mistakes and regrets and staggering personal loss. And, if he came to presidency, he was unlikely to supply much of the exalted rhetoric that reaches into a nation's soul. But, for a people in mourning, he might offer something like solace, a language of healing." After the exalted and the scatological, Joseph Robinette Biden Jr has brought a very normal American idiom to the politics of healing, which is not metaphorical any longer. ■

INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor

THE ONE-TRICK pony that he is, Arvind Kejriwal, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) supremo and chief minister of Delhi, has little to offer other than the promise of free water and electricity to hoodwink the people into voting for his party. Not that he has to pay the hefty tab for such freebies. For proof, ask the hard-pressed rate-paying middle class in Delhi. It has had to underwrite the costs of the AAP boss' need to entice the numerically stronger vote banks in the resettlement and illegal colonies. The monthly outgo of an average middle-income family has increased considerably since the coming of the self-styled harbinger of 'new politics'. Having thus won over the voting classes in the national capital, Kejriwal has now set his sights on Goa. Ahead of the municipal elections in the state, AAP has unleashed a massive media campaign, promising free electricity to the Goans. Whether voters in the forward-looking state would be impressed by the blatant 'bribe' is unclear, but the AAP is pressing ahead undeterred, taking out ads in newspapers to promise free power. The other day, the Goa edition of a major national daily—the only one published in New Delhi and trying valiantly to beat the competition from local rivals with its usual predatory pricing but without much success—had this huge ad on page one. In bold letters, the copy read: 'Kejriwal gives free electricity 24 hours. Goans also want it...' Now, whether they want it or not, would be known from the outcome of the municipal polls due in the next few weeks, but the fact that the AAP boss is a trapeze artist adept at embracing completely contrary positions depending on the targeted voter group, is by now well known.

For, at the onset of winter and the killer air pollution, the mugshot of Kejriwal was splashed in a multimedia campaign along with the self-congratulatory announcement by the Delhi government criminalising the burning of farm waste, stipulating hefty fines and prison terms for offenders. But this did not prevent the AAP quick-change artist to try and identify himself with the Punjab farmers amassed at the Delhi border, even though one of their main demand was to decriminalise, yes, decriminalise waste burning. In fact, banking on the typical ignorance of the protestors, the AAP leader hoped nobody would notice that the Delhi government was one of the first to notify the very-same farm reform legislation for the repeal of which the Punjab-Haryana farmers are squatting in the bitter cold at the Delhi border. The evocative Hindi phrase which aptly describes Kejriwal the politician, and with which the protesting farmers are most likely to be familiar with, is *'Ganga Gaye Ganga Das, Jamuna Gaye Jamuna Das.'*

ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVIST and BJP leader Maneka Gandhi is slipping up. In normal times, she would have created a shindy when a high-profile leader like Rahul Gandhi flies all the way to Tamil Nadu to watch *jallikattu* in order to connect with the voters on the eve of the Assembly election in the state. Unless, of course, Maneka and her sister, Ambika Shukla, limit their activism to the defence of stray dogs. Despite the ban by the apex court, Tamil politicians have continued to patronise the traditional sport. But whereas the Tamil Nadu version of bullfight is widely known, Goa too has its own version called *'dhirios'*. This too involves gory bullfights with the wildly animated supporters egging on their favourite fighter to subdue its challenger. *Dhirios*, too, was banned by the higher judiciary several years ago but, undeterred, the Goans continue to engage in the blood-curdling sport without nary a concern either for the animals or the fear of the police. A few days ago, thousands of Goans gathered in an open agriculture field to watch a series of bull fights unconcerned about the judicial ban and the local police. Whether it is *jallikattu* in Tamil Nadu or *dhirios* in Goa, so long as rival politicians are not on the same page with animal rights activists, the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act will continue to be observed in its blatant violation. In the name of preserving a cultural tradition, poor bulls will continue to be mauled and gored. But are carnivores among us, especially those obsessed with halal meats, right to raise eyebrows?

ON MY SOCIAL media site, a friend posed the question: So if tomorrow the income tax payers stage a dharna at the Delhi border, will the Supreme Court suspend implementation of the Income Tax Act? Just asking... Amen ■

Incredible !ndia

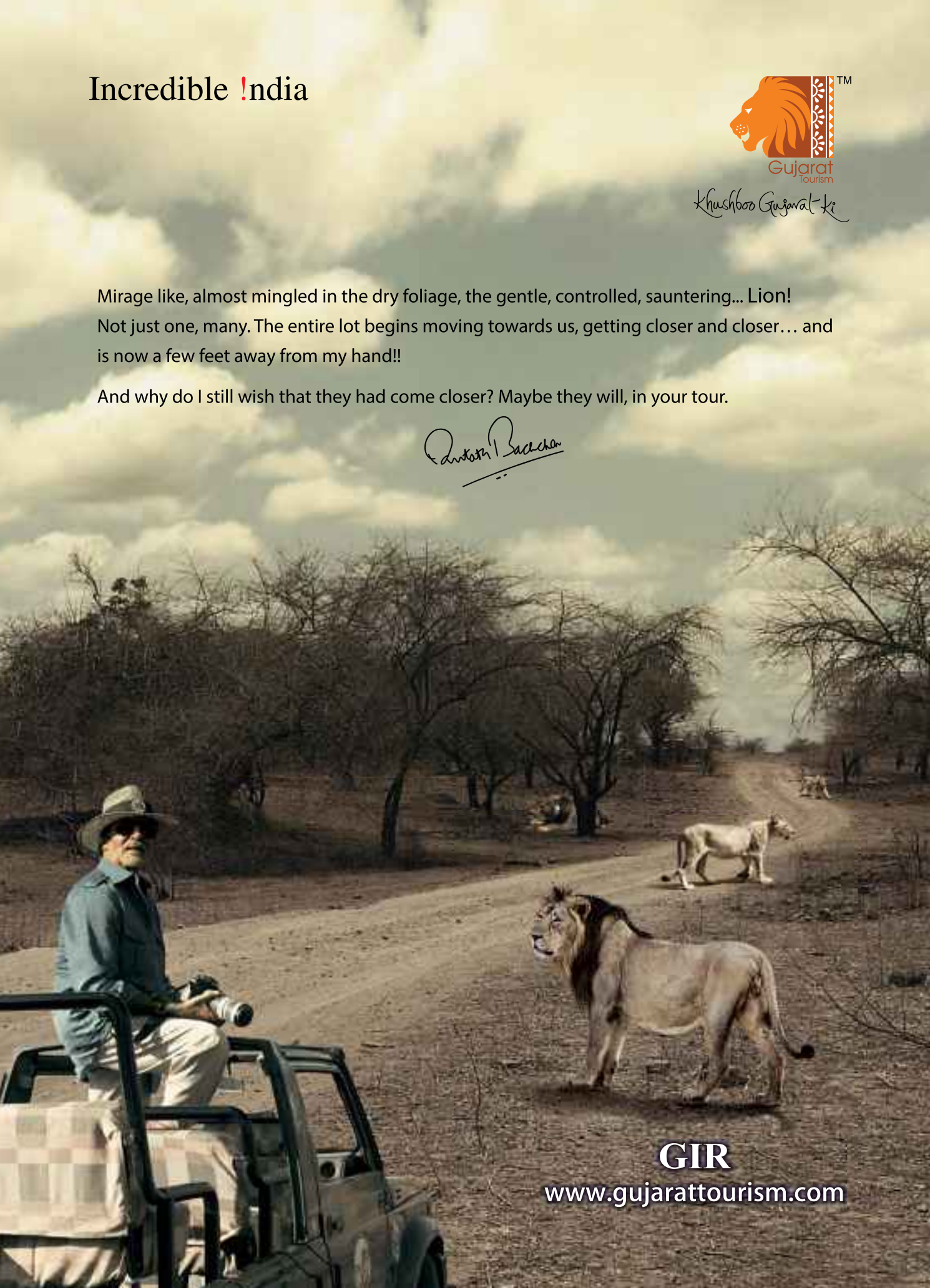
Gujarat Tourism™

Khushboo Gujarat Ki

Mirage like, almost mingled in the dry foliage, the gentle, controlled, sauntering... Lion!
Not just one, many. The entire lot begins moving towards us, getting closer and closer… and is now a few feet away from my hand!!

And why do I still wish that they had come closer? Maybe they will, in your tour.

Amitabh Bachchan



GIR

www.gujarattourism.com

MUMBAI NOTEBOOK

Anil Dharker

SHAH RUKH KHAN'S tweet said he stayed up all night to watch India beat Australia. I got up at 5.30 in the morning, which is Mumbai time, for play to begin at the Gabba. Obviously, the stratosphere Shah Rukh Khan lives in, is in a different time zone. No matter, he and I and one billion fellow Indians exulted, rejoiced, cheered and threw our non-existing hats in the air as Rishabh Pant hit the winning four. And there we were till recently, ruing Rishabh's immaturity and calling him Half Pant!

But, then, all of these young men in whites proved every pundit wrong with their stories of grit and valour. There was Ashwin, the bowler who could occasionally bat (so seldom, it became an occasion) braving it out for 128 balls at Sydney (which is the exact same number faced by the whole Indian team at Adelaide when it was shot out for 36). There was, and is, and forever will be at the crease, Cheteshwar Pujara, the immovable sphinx, the man who writes off one end for the opposition and wipes the smiles off the Aussies. Just when you thought there couldn't be another Pujara (and hoped there wouldn't be), there was Hanuma Vihari, hamstrung at Sydney, but unshakeable for 161 balls. There was the Palghar Express, Shardul Thakur, so called not because he bowls fast but because he caught that train at five each morning to get to cricket practice.

The honours list is long and lovely. There was the smiling assassin Jasprit Bumrah, the melancholy Ajinkya Rahane whose still waters run deep, the elegant Shubman Gill, Mohammed Siraj the rickshawallah's son who cried when the national anthem was played but mercilessly broke the Aussie back, T Natarajan, the net bowler whose mother ran a food stall, and who stayed back even when his daughter was born to end up opening India's attack, and finally, the strangely named, but never ruffled, Washington Sundar, making his

presence felt with both bat and ball.

There was a time when Australia at its peak could field two world-beating teams. Dare we say India can do that now?

"INDIA READY TO protect the world with not just one but two 'Made in India' vaccines", quoth the PM just the other day. Pity one of them calls itself Oxford AstraZeneca. At least Bharat Biotech sounds like the real, 100 per cent *atmanirbhar*, fully full genuine article. In a brilliant and unique move not thought of by any pharma company in the world, it has made the population at large part of its Phase 3 trial. That's what you call *kullad*, or is it *jugaad*. Same to same, what's in a name, let OxfordZeneca with its foreign name put on airs, while all our politicians line up to receive the vaccine which has our country's name.

In the meantime, other countries are limping along in their own incompetent ways. On the day our PM proudly inaugurated our very first vaccination, the US, led by the moronic Trump, had already administered 12.28 million doses, China with the show-offy Xi King Pin, had administered 10 million doses and the UK, led by the much mocked Boris Johnson, had completed 4.51 million vaccinations.

THE *HINDUSTAN TIMES* for our edification and enlightenment, carried an article titled 'Number Theory', with the theme 'Imagining India ten years from now'. To start with, this shows unwarranted optimism about the longevity of nations. Be that as it may, in 2023 according to the Number Theory, India's population will be 1.420 billion and China's 1.414 billion, so we will be Number One! As Shashi Tharoor would say, or was it Donald Trump, that's huuuge!

There's another joyful statistic. India's working age population (in other words, the poor sods between 20 and 59) will increase from 55.8 per cent to 58.8 per cent in 2031. It seems like too much fuss being made about one little number but the experts say it's huuuge! Apparently, the seemingly small percentage increase amounts to an additional 97 million people in the workforce. This is called, in certain elevated circles 'A Demographic Dividend', because the poor sods between 20 and 59 increase the nation's productivity, producing goods and things and thereby adding to the general happiness and common weal. This is good news for the good people at *Hindustan Times*, and good news for our Great Leader, because he will surely find jobs for all these extra 97 million, plus the many million jobless now. When has he ever let us down?

NOW FOR SOME news from Amazon: Special 50 per cent discount offer! Including free delivery! A package of a dozen 'pure and original holy cow dung cakes (for *havan*, *pujan* and religious purposes).'

The company always carries customer reviews. One says, 'Ridiculous taste!! It tasted very bad when I ate it. It was grasslike and muddy in taste. I got loose motions after that. Please be a little more hygienic while manufacturing. Also pay attention to the taste and crunchiness of this product.'

Something tells me this can't be true: it has to be a parody account. What do you think? ■

While
Inside
Look
Outside
With
OPEN

For
FREE
access
visit

www.openthemagazine.com

OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

India Rising

THE GABBA IS a fortress. It is to the Australian cricket team what Roland-Garros is to Rafael Nadal. Maybe more. No cricket team has dominated a ground like the Australians do here (with the exception of Pakistan and its 34-match undefeated streak at Karachi's National Cricket Stadium between 1955 to 2000). Visiting teams don't play as much as get slaughtered here. Leading to that other popular name by which the venue goes: the Gabbatoir.

The ground is massive by the standards of most cricket grounds in the world today. It has a surfeit of pace and bounce, the two things Asian teams have historically feared and struggled against. And by the fourth and fifth days, the cracks grow so wide as to make the pitch dangerous. When a batsman looks around, it is said, he can feel as though he has been dropped into a gladiatorial pit. Back in the 1950s, the English cricket writer John Kay remarked, 'It is not a cricket ground at all. It is a concentration camp.' Kay was referring to the poor conditions of the stadium and the difficulty of playing on the wicket, especially after it rained. 'Then it is a strip of turf with thousands of demons prancing up and down,' he said, '...only a Hutton [the great English batsman Len Hutton] could stay, let alone score runs.'

The stadium has been redesigned and renovated over the years. But its fierce reputation has survived. Australia had gone unbeaten in 32 matches at this venue, their last defeat coming at the hands of the mighty West Indian team of 1988. This has been on occasion the first venue visiting teams play on. And the psychological scar of the mauling they receive here travels with them for the rest of their tour. Everybody knows this. Best of all, the Australian team. On the final day of the Sydney Test match, when the shadows lengthened and it became all but certain that India would draw the match, the Australian captain Tim Paine uttered an obscenity and told R Ashwin, 'Can't wait to get you to the Gabba.' There is a bit of history to that remark. India defeated Australia in a Test series last time round not just because there was no David Warner and Steven Smith, but also, some said, because no match was scheduled at the Gabba. When news emerged that India was apprehensive of undergoing the harsh quarantine rules at Brisbane this time, a few Australians put it down to the fear of playing at the Gabba.

There were both Warner and Smith for the final match at the Gabba, along with what is considered the best bowling attack in the world. At the other end, the Indian team, beset with injuries and leaves through the tour, had cobbled together a bowling unit of first-timers and net bowlers. (The pandemic having fortuitously forced India to travel with its own net bowlers.) The preview sheet at the start of the match made for quite a contrast. Australia's bowlers had taken 1,013 wickets between themselves before the match. India, just 11.

At the end of the fourth day, after rain had washed off almost an entire session, the overwhelming feeling everywhere was that India should aim for a draw. A loss was a heartbreaking but likely event. A draw, especially if rain arrived as predicted, was achievable. The other likelihood, to win by chasing 328 runs against that bowling attack, that too at the Gabba, could only be a cricket romantic's punt.

Through this match—and, in fact, the series—young player after another came, from Shubman Gill and Rishabh Pant to Washington Sundar to Shardul Thakur, each one of them without an iota of self-doubt, to dismiss such celebrated names at such mythologised venues

India had provided several big moments throughout the series. From being blown away to its lowest score in history, to achieving one of its greatest Test match victories a week later, followed by one of the great rearguard battles which led to a draw but, as Ajinkya Rahane put it later, felt every bit like a win. Even up to those four days in the final Test, India had refused to throw in the towel. Irrespective of what transpired on the final day, this was already one of India's greatest Test series. They were going to return home as heroes, no matter what. A loss wouldn't have been

GETTY IMAGES

The victorious Indian team at the Gabba in Brisbane, January 19

grudged. A drawn Test, which would mean India still retained the Border-Gavaskar trophy, would have provided a near-perfect ending.

But that is where everyone, even the fans of this cricket team, got it wrong. We all suffered from a lack of imagination. Near-perfect was never going to do for this team.

India produced its greatest cricket moment in Tests the following day. Cheteshwar Pujara, an anachronism in today's aggressive batsmanship, literally put his body on the line as he held one end up. He offered his body willingly, and he was hit by Australian bowlers several times all through the day, on his helmet, ribs, hands and fingers. His strategy was akin to that of the boxer Muhammad Ali who took upon himself one punishing blow after another to tire his stronger rival George Foreman in the match dubbed as 'The Rumble in the Jungle'. Except that the counter-punches came from the stroke-players at the other end, first from Shubman Gill and later by the wicketkeeper-batsman Rishabh Pant. Through this match—and, in fact, the series—young player after another came, from Gill and Pant to Washington Sundar to Shardul Thakur, each one of them without an iota of self-doubt, to dismiss such celebrated names at such mythologised venues. They hooked fast bowlers for sixes. They hit spinners on a fifth day pitch against the turn for sixes. Every time the team found themselves at an impasse, a new individual took them across. In fact, if you look at the batting and bowling charts of the series, it is led by Australians, exhibiting just how much of a team effort led to this series win.

Where does this impossible series win leave team India? Perhaps, it will not mean anything more than what transpired over that month. But in the players—and, more importantly, the team character—this series has unearthed, it feels like it will mean something much more.

For some time Virat Kohli and Ravi Shastri have insisted that theirs is a new Indian side, Kohli even dismissing Greg Chappell's compliment that the Indian captain is the most Australian non-Australian cricketer, calling himself instead a representation of a new India.. This team has shown glimpses over the last few years of that newness in approach and belief, in its Test series win in Australia back in 2018-2019, victories in England and South Africa. Now it has submitted clinching evidence.

This year is lined up with several marquee tournaments for India. They will be hosting England and South Africa, and more importantly, travelling to those countries later. They are considered impregnable in their homes. But if the Indian team could pull off such a series win with a depleted squad in Australia, who is to say they cannot take those countries down in their own homes. And then there is the inaugural World Test Championship final, which India now has a very good chance of reaching, and the T20 Asia and World Cups.

This Australia series, as bright a moment as it is for Indian cricket history, could just be the launching pad that takes the Indian team into uncharted territory. ■

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

IN MEMORIAM • V SHANTA (1927-2021)

DOCTOR ON DUTY

She dedicated her life to making cancer treatment accessible

WHEN THE NAME Dr V Shanta is mentioned, the word that crops up most often is 'service'. The 93-year-old oncologist and the chairperson of Adyar Cancer Institute, Chennai, dedicated her life to the service of cancer patients for 65 years. The Cancer Institute is recognised as a preeminent one in the country, especially for providing quality and affordable treatment to *all* its patients.

The Cancer Institute was founded in 1954 by Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy, the first woman medical graduate in the country. She'd seen her young sister die of cancer in 1923. Aware that treatments existed outside of India, she was determined to bring that level of treatment here. The Adyar Cancer Institute was the first specialised centre for cancer treatment in south India, and the second in India after the Tata Memorial Hospital in Bombay.

In a 2015, TEDxVIT Vellore talk, Dr V Shanta elaborated on the many obstacles the institute faced at the time of starting. In 1955, the centre opened with 12 beds in "Sewagram type of huts" under a thatched roof. The staff consisted of two honorary medical officers, two auxiliary nurses and one technician. She was one of the two doctors. Her first remuneration at the institute was Rs 200 a month, and she was offered residence on the campus. She moved in on April 13th, 1955, and lived in the same room on the top floor till the end. She chose to stay as close as possible to her critical patients and spurned worldly comforts.

Today, the institute can house up to 500 in-patients. Speaking about the institute's trajectory over the decades, she said, "We've grown by the grace of god, but essentially through a commitment and motivation and an ethos of service. There have been many obstacles, but we've managed because of dedication." Along with Dr Krishnamurthi (Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy's son), she ensured that while 40 per cent are paying beds at the institute, the remaining are general beds where patients are boarded and lodged free of cost.

In her own words (in a 2005 interview to *Frontline*), Dr V Shanta said she hailed from a 'fairly illustrious family'. Her grandfather was the physics Nobel laureate CV Raman and her paternal uncle Dr S Chandrasekhar was also a Nobel laureate. She grew up in her grandfather's library and was inspired by a 'Lady Duffrin, a medical professional, who went about in uniform, smart, independent and extremely professional,' leaving 'a lasting impression' on her. In 1944, she joined the Madras Medical College. As a small built woman (and at a time when women in medicine were still rare), she was encouraged to take up obstetrics and gynaecology. She chose to be different and decided to work on cancer.

Over her long career, she has been felicitated with numerous awards including the Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan, Padma Vibhushan and Ramon Magsaysay Award. Her death was mourned not only by the thousands who she treated and helped but also by national leaders, such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Chennai-based senior advocate NL Rajah has been associated with the Adyar Cancer Institute for over 30 years. While his first meetings with Dr V Shanta were of "client litigant" nature, over time she became "like a mother," he says. He recalls numerous incidents with her which revealed her sacrifice, dedication and humility. Despite her numerous felicitations, she still felt she was the "least qualified" in her family of Nobel laureates. He says, "Even in her 90s, she was remarkably fit. She'd come and meet me in my office." When he told her that he'd come to the institute, she replied, "We professionals need to respect each other and each other's time." He once asked her how come he'd never seen her wearing spectacles, to which she replied with a smile, "Put it down to my vanity". She was meeting and taking care of patients till the very end. She invested all her time and energy in trying to ensure that the best cancer care was available to all her patients. She treated all her patients with the same care and attention. NL Rajah says, "She was wedded to medicine and patient care." ■

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

By NANDINI NAIR

ANGLE

BREACHING 50,000

On the Sensex touching historic levels in the midst of an unprecedented recession

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

IT WAS JUST under a year ago, towards the end of March after the lockdown was announced that the stock market crashed to levels no one thought possible. The Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) Sensex went below 26,000. A month before that, it was at 40,000. And now here we are, with the economy still in the doldrums and the end of the pandemic still some distance away, that the Sensex for the first time in its history crossed 50,000. Just as the bottom level had been unimaginable, the peak now is just as incomprehensible because the stock market has one ironclad rule—over the long run, it must reflect the state of the economy. As Benjamin Graham, the father of value investing, had pointed out—in the short run, the stock market is a voting machine, in the long run, a weighing machine. Supply and demand drive immediate prices of stocks but eventually it will have to mirror the performance of the company and, the Sensex, which is a group of the 30 best companies of India, will have to correlate with the state of the economy.

The 50,000 crossover might, therefore, be the voting machine in action. However, even if there is a reversal at some point, which again brings it back to reasonable levels, what the Sensex has also mirrored is the India story and it has been one of optimism. The index level was pegged at 100 for 1979. Which means that there had been a 500-fold increase in four decades. Much of it has been post-liberalisation with just as wild swings as we are seeing now. In 1990, for instance, the Sensex was at around 1,000. Two years later, it would rise to 4,000 on the back of the Harshad Mehta scam. But it would take till 2006 to touch 10,000. Since then, despite the 2008 investment banks going bust, global recession and Covid, it has continued to gallop away.

Why is it peaking? Because the markets are only concerned with the future and it expects the pandemic to end now that vaccine rollouts have begun. Also, central banks across the world have been pumping in incredible amounts of money into the system to stave off recession. That has to go somewhere and a lot of it lands in equities which promise greater returns. But these are double-edged swords. It is liquidity backed by crippled economies and one big pin will burst the bubble. Some veteran investors, like Jeremy Grantham, are even predicting a crash on the scale of the 1929 US depression. India seems especially vulnerable at this moment because it had been an economy that was tottering even before the pandemic. A global event will lead to foreign money being sucked out just as it happened last March, and then there could be another big bottom from this historic high.

But then the Sensex perhaps only reflects the uncertainties of the world that we have entered now, where seesaws are no longer outliers but regular phenomena. If you are, however, willing to take a long-term view, then 50,000 might just be one more ordinary milestone in a long story. ■

IDEAS

GETTY IMAGES

RENAMING

If Gujarat Chief Minister Vijay Rupani were a philosopher, he would be asking himself what is the essence of something and if it makes any difference, then what it is called. It explains why, out of the blue, he announced this week that his government has decided to rename the dragon fruit to *'kamalam'* because its outside looks like a lotus. The lotus is also his party's symbol. All in all, because of the absurdity of the move, he gets good publicity that bolsters his standing within his party and constituency. But the dragon fruit remains what it always was. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'It ain't what they call you, it's what you answer to'

WC FIELDS
AMERICAN COMEDIAN

By Makarand R Paranjape

Nivedita's Anguish

Vivekananda and the Himalayan connection—Part VIII

SPIRITUAL SITES, ESPECIALLY high-energy mountainous shrines, bring to the fore unresolved tension and inner turbulence. For Sister Nivedita, the journey to the Himalayas with her master, Swami Vivekananda, proved this to be more than true. It was for her almost the proverbial dark night of the soul.

In her posthumously published travelogue, *Notes of Wanderings with Swami Vivekananda* (1913), Nivedita describes her halcyon days before her Himalayan sojourn. From March to May 1898, she stayed with Sara Chapman Ole Bull, whom Vivekananda called 'Dhira Mata'. They were ensconced in a small riverfront cottage in Belur, outside Calcutta.

Of their home by the Ganges, Swami Vivekananda had remarked, "You will find that little house of Dhira Mata like heaven, for it is all love, from beginning to end" (*bit.ly/2Kzf7lr*).

Looking across the river to Dakshineswar, at some distance from the monastery where the Swami and the monks resided, their retreat indeed presented 'an unbroken harmony... everything alike beautiful—the green stretch of grass, the tall cocoanut palms, the little brown villages in the jungle, and the Nilkantha [bird] that built her nest in a treetop beside us' (*ibid*).

Each day, Vivekananda would visit in the morning hours, continuing his vivid and unique lessons on every conceivable topic, but especially on Indian history, philosophy, religion and spirituality. As Nivedita recalls, 'Whatever might be the subject of the conversation, it ended always on the note of the infinite... He might appear to take up any subject—literary, ethnological or scientific—but he always made us feel it as an illustration of the Ultimate Vision. There was for him nothing secular' (*ibid*). The call to the infinite also meant, for Vivekananda, revulsion for all forms of slavery: 'He had a loathing for bondage and a horror of those who 'cover chains with flowers',' (*ibid*).

On May 3rd, visiting with Sarada Ma, Sri Ramakrishna's spouse, better known as Holy Mother, the Swami became very concerned over the prevailing situation in Bengal. 'The political sky was black,' Nivedita recollects, 'It seemed as if a storm were about to burst... Plague, panic and riot were doing their fell work' (*ibid*). In a premonition of his poem, 'Kali the Mother', the master said to the two Western ladies, "There are some who scoff at the existence of Kâli. Yet today She is out there amongst the people. They are frantic with fear, and the soldiery have been called to deal out death. Who can say that God does not manifest Himself as evil as well as good? But only the Hindu dares to worship Him in the evil" (*ibid*).

Perhaps, it was to safeguard his Western lady-guests that Vivekananda set out a week later on May 11th for the long journey to the hills. Apart from his *gurubhais*, Sara Bull and Nivedita, Josephine McLeod (Jo or Jaya) and Mrs Paterson, the wife of US Consul General Paterson, also accompanied Vivekananda. Entraining at Howrah Junction, they arrived at Kathgodam in the Himalayan foothills two days later on May 13th.

For Nivedita it was an eventful summer, etched in 'memory as a series of pictures, painted like old altar-pieces, against a golden background of religious ardour and simplicity, and all alike glorified by the presence of one who, to us in his immediate circle, formed their central point' (*bit.ly/2XVXa3s*).

In Calcutta, before this trip, Nivedita had no doubt heard of 'the spiritual life', even prepared for it in a fashion under her master's tutelage. She had thought of it 'as a thing definite and accessible, to be chosen deliberately, and attained by following certain well-known paths' (*bit.ly/2Kxvteb*). But in the Himalayas, she discovered that its roots lay 'deep in a yearning love of God, in an anguished pursuit of the Infinite' (*ibid*). While others talked about its 'ways and means', Vivekananda's was different: 'He knew how to light a fire. Where others gave directions, he would show the thing itself' (*ibid*).

Nivedita, during her difficult discipleship, had to turn into somewhat of a 'thought-reader' for nothing was explicit. She had 'to enter sufficiently into the circuit of [her] Master's energy to be able to give evidence regarding it from direct perception' (*ibid*). Gradually, she began to recognise that the process was both rigorous and scientific, 'subject to laws as definite as those of any physical force' (*ibid*). On matters personal, the Swami maintained a 'delicate hauteur', reserved to the point of being touchy. Theoretical questions and discussions were of little interest to him; what mattered was direct experience.

While he had himself invited Nivedita to travel with him in order to train her, he gave her no personal attention or spe-

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

WHEN IT CAME TO SISTER NIVEDITA'S RELATION WITH HER MASTER, SWAMI VIVEKANANDA, IT COULD 'ONLY BE DESCRIBED AS ONE OF CLASH AND CONFLICT'. NIVEDITA'S SENSE OF NATURAL AND ACQUIRED MENTAL SELF-SUFFICIENCY WAS GRADUALLY BEING DESTROYED. THOUGH SHE HAD VOLUNTARILY EMBARKED ON THE SPIRITUAL PATH FAMOUSLY DESCRIBED IN THE UPANISHADS AS AKIN TO THE RAZOR'S EDGE, SHE FOUND HERSELF 'LITTLE PREPARED FOR THAT CONSTANT REBUKE AND ATTACK UPON ALL MY MOST CHERISHED PREPOSSESSIONS WHICH WAS NOW MY LOT'

cific instructions. 'In all that year of 1898 I can remember only one occasion when the Swami invited me to walk alone with him for half an hour,' reminisces Nivedita. But even then the conversation, on policy and programmes, avoided anything subjective (*ibid*).

'Wholly in bewilderment', she turned to the newly ordained young monk, Swami Swarupananda, for daily lessons in meditation and Hinduism. Swarupananda, who founded, as we have already seen, the Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, and also became the editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*, served as a 'heliograph', translating, as it were, the encoded messages of Vivekananda to her.

Swarupananda had been received just a few days after Nivedita in Belur, but had progressed rapidly. In a few weeks, he had been ordained as a *sanyasin* by Vivekananda himself. One of the scenes that had turned him from the world was the piteous sight of an old woman, crying and moaning as she picked up, grain by grain, the rice from her bowl, carelessly tipped into the dust by a passerby. How could a just and benevolent God allow such senseless pain and suffering?

Determined to break the illusion, he had renounced the world to find the truth. To Swarupananda, it was the 'ignorance and selfishness of the mind itself' which was the source of 'pain and pleasure, of justice and injustice' (*ibid*). He was impelled, as Nivedita puts it, 'to gain deliverance from the perception of opposites, and to attain to that permanent realisation of One-ness which is known, in the Hindu conception of life, as Mukti' (*ibid*).

She had started studying the Bhagavad Gita with Swarupananda in Almora, learning to know 'the love of God as a burning thirst'.' Swarupananda also taught her how to meditate. Else, as Nivedita confesses, 'One of the greatest hours of my life would have passed me by.' Why? Because when it came to her relation with her master, Swami Vivekananda, it could 'only be described as one of clash and conflict'.

Nivedita's sense of natural and acquired mental self-sufficiency was gradually being destroyed. Though she had voluntarily embarked on the spiritual path famously described in the Upanishads as akin to the razor's edge, she found herself 'little prepared for that constant rebuke and attack upon all my most cherished prepossessions which was now my lot' (*ibid*).

She was perceptive enough to know that 'suffering is often illogical', but she was unable to understand 'the degree of unhappiness which I experienced at this time, as I saw the dream of a friendly and beloved leader falling away from me, and the picture of one who would be at least indifferent, and possibly, silently hostile, substituting itself instead'.

Nivedita, however, did not turn away from the master or her chosen path: 'Fortunately it never occurred to me to retract my own proffered service, but I was made to realise, as the days went by, that in this there would be no personal sweetness' (*ibid*).

Nivedita's mental and emotional turbulence would come to a head in the sacred, icy grotto of Amarnath.

(To be continued) ■

Nawabs of Negativity

Look who has lost faith in Indian democracy

By Minhaz Merchant

BORIS JOHNSON, WITH his cultivated air of dishevelment, won't be missed on India's Republic Day. It's as good a time as any though to assess where India stands 71 years after the Constitution was adopted.

A key argument centres around the state of democracy in India. Congress President-in-all-but-name Rahul Gandhi declared with the air of a man issuing a *fatwa* that there is "no democracy in India".

Is he right? For farmers who continue to protest in large numbers in Delhi against the suspended farm laws in defiance of both the Government and the Supreme Court, their freedom of expression unimpeded, democracy in India appears in rude health.

Democracy is ideology-agnostic. It gives free rein to even those who in the manner of a drain inspector look for a problem in every solution rather than for a solution in every problem. This has now developed into a thriving cottage industry, ironically on the heels of the prime minister's *aatmanirbhar* exhortation to "Make in India".

Like Make in India products from other industries, there is an imported component here as well. Protesting farmers, for example, have imports from Canada. Deprived of exposing India's alleged lack of democracy in front of the global media which would have accompanied Boris Johnson on January 26th had he not cancelled, the protestors by vowing nonetheless to disrupt Republic Day have unwittingly showcased the freedoms available under the broad tent of Indian democracy.

When India won Independence, few gave the new country longevity. They have been proved wrong. Instead of breaking up into balkanised pieces, India consolidated: it subdued Hyderabad in six days, Goa in two days. Sikkim became a part of the Republic in 1975. Far from splintering, India expanded into 28 states and eight Union Territories.

The prophets of doom were dismayed. How could a country, bled dry by 190 years of brutish British depredation, be on the cusp of becoming the world's third-largest economy a mere seven decades after Independence? The ascent, as both the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have clinically noted, will take place around 2030, placing India's GDP behind only the US and China and ahead of Japan and Germany.

India's Nawabs of Negativity are mortified. How could this come to pass? India wasn't *supposed* to prosper or stay in one piece.

Indian political leaders have done their bit to lend credibility to the false prophets of doom and slow India's inevitable rise with a litany of missteps. Jawaharlal Nehru mishandled China and Pakistan. Indira Gandhi stalled the economy. Manmohan Singh allowed himself to be remote-controlled. And now Narendra Modi is giving back the bureaucracy the power it lost in the years following economic liberalisation.

India's bureaucrats and regulators can't believe their luck. They issue rules that deliberately seek to obfuscate. Guidelines recently issued for cosmetic products by the Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution run into dozens of mindnumbing pages. In the US, regulatory guidelines for similar products are covered in three pages.

Democracy has clear guidelines. One, freedom of expression is precious. Don't abuse it by inciting violence. Two, freedom to protest is a non-negotiable right—as long as it does not endanger the lives of others or obstructs their livelihoods.

Those who control the narrative in India rarely speak truth to power. They distort and dissemble. Activists and opposition leaders backing farmers' protests twisted the narrative by claiming that the protestors were called Khalistanis

Those who control the narrative in India rarely speak truth to power. They distort and dissemble. Activists and opposition leaders backing farmers' protests twisted the narrative by claiming that the protestors were called Khalistanis.

They were not. The charge was that a small minority of Khalistani separatists—as the attorney general told the Supreme Court—had infiltrated farmers' protests. A drop of ink can darken a bowl of clear water.

The art of dissembling and distorting the narrative has been finely honed since 2014. The fraudulent narrative is strengthened by the Modi Government's inept and infrequent briefings. Nature abhors a vacuum. Disinformation revels in it.

The media is a useful handmaiden in helping the Nawabs of Negativity subvert the narrative. Leading dailies practise an exclusion zone. Voices are selectively quarantined. Television debates become incestuous echo chambers.

Engagement across the ideological aisle is the heartbeat of democracy. Issues, not ideology, should govern opinion. On social and cultural issues, lean left. On economics and business, lean right. Overall, stay dead centre.

The Modi Government's policies have been a curious mix of excellent and mediocre. They need clear-eyed criticism, not doomsday prophecies. ■

Minhaz Merchant is an author, editor and publisher

"THE NATION IS EVOLVING AND SO ARE YOU"

OPEN brings to you, your weekly thought stimulant

..... Pick up and subscribe your copy today .....

Read

OPEN

[No one makes an argument better than us]

---

www.openthemagazine.com | To subscribe, 'openmag' to 9999800012

openthemagazine | openthemag

App Store | Available as an e-magazine for tablets, mobiles and desktops via Magzter

By Rachel Dwyer

May the Road Rise up to Meet You

And don't go away with a goodbye

WE'VE JUST SAID goodbye to one of the worst years most of us recall. There were also sad goodbyes, leaving only memories. I hope this year will be one where the goodbyes aren't sad but bring the promise of happy returns.

In the Indian languages I know, people don't say they are 'going', but rather are 'coming (back)', a message of promise for a happy future. I've just learnt (in this week's lesson on Bengali kinship) to say, '*Mashima, ashi, kemon?* (Auntie, I'm going now, OK?)', just as one says '*Main abhi aati hoon* (I'll be right back)' in Hindi.

These are subtle things one has to be told when learning a language. Sir Elijah Impey, in his *Memoirs* (1846), writes that one of the many versions of songs from Varanasi about Warren Hastings was *'Hatee pur houda! ghora pur zeen, Juldee jao, juldee jao, Warren Hasteen!'* (I've also read versions where the horse has the howdah and the elephant the saddle). Macaulay interpreted it as praise, 'Go swiftly!' whereas it's an insult, meaning 'Run away, Warren Hastings!'

When I was a student, we didn't learn conversation in 'classical' languages, but spoken Sanskrit has been much revived in recent years. From what I know, one promises to see the addressee again soon, a *punardarshan*, or other expressions promising return. Many European languages do this too: French (*Au revoir*) or German (*Auf Wiedersehen*).

Others say 'take care', so Greek *erroso* or *eutukei* (be well, be prosperous). Latin's 'hail' (*ave*) and 'farewell' (*vale*) are used in a famous poem by Catullus, addressed to his late brother, '*Ave atque vale*'.

Many greetings are the same for coming and going, such as the Italian *arrivederci*, or in many north Indian languages, paying respects with *namaste* or using the name of God, so 'Ram Ram' or 'Jai Shri Krishna'. 'Jai Shri Ram' has become politicised for some, while formal forms used by Muslims, such as *alvida* and *Khuda hafiz*, have often been replaced by *Allah hafiz*.

In English, 'goodbye' wishes the other well, literally 'God be with you', but no mention of which God. And 'farewell' is a bit quaint nowadays. So 'bye', and regional variants 'tata', 'tara' and other older forms, 'cheerio', 'toodlepip', 'pippip', 'so long' exist.

Sometimes there is a taboo on saying goodbye, as Peter Pan puts it, 'Never say goodbye because goodbye means going away, and going away means forgetting,' as does the famous song, then film, says *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna.*

There are many songs about goodbyes, mostly sad, though sometimes they are to raise the spirits, perhaps when 'Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye', the Gracie Fields song in *Mera Naam Joker* (1970) or 'It's a long way to Tipperary', played by a band in *Pather Panchali* (1955).

Many cheerful Hindi film songs which say goodbye, if not exactly cheerful, are at least full of promise, of a future not an end of something in the past.

When the bride leaves her wedding to go to her husband's house is a time to cry, at least traditionally. One of the most famous and beautiful examples is Shakuntala's farewell to the hermitage forest in Kalidasa's play. It is all the sadder as we know that she is leaving her world behind—her (adopted) father, her friends, and the plants and trees which are her friends and family—to go to her husband but we know she has been cursed that he won't remember her.

The film songs sing of the bride leaving the happiness she enjoyed in her father's house but in a film, at least, there is a promise of a happy life ahead. There is a whole genre of these songs but most of my favourites are the old ones.

Some are too sad, such as, *'Chhod babul ka ghar'* from *Babul* (1950) as Bela never gets to marry her beloved; nor does Paro who cries as the Bauls sing *'Saajan ki ho gayi'* (not a farewell song but about a woman wanting to leave her parents' home for her beloved) as she doesn't marry Devdas (*Devdas*, 1957).

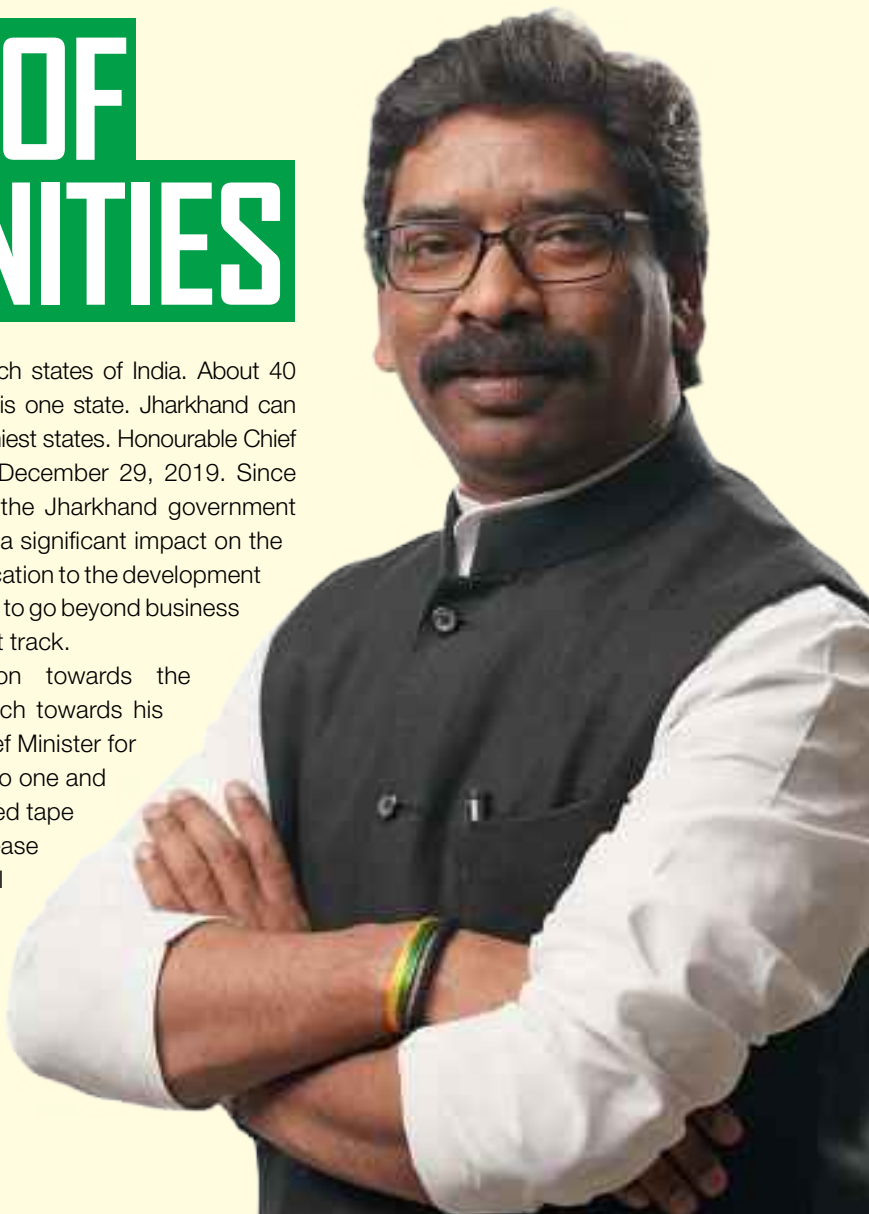
But although *Mother India* (1957) is not a happy film (spoiler alert: getting to inaugurate a dam is not much compensation for losing your husband, having to kill your son and abandoning your home), the song which

THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITIES

Jharkhand is one of the most resource-rich states of India. About 40 percent of Indian minerals come from this one state. Jharkhand can easily rise to become one of India's wealthiest states. Honourable Chief Minister Hemant Soren took office on December 29, 2019. Since then, he has made significant changes to how the Jharkhand government administration operates and has started to leave a significant impact on the people of Jharkhand. With a sharp focus and dedication to the development of the state, the Honourable Chief Minister is willing to go beyond business as usual in his attempt to put the state on the right track.

The Honourable Chief Ministers dedication towards the development of the state and his micro approach towards his people upliftment has established him as the Chief Minister for the people and is seen as being very accessible to one and all. The Chief Minister has been trying to reduce red tape in the functioning of the government and increase public outreach through both physical and digital channels to anyone across the country. People from across the state gather every week at the Chief Minister's official residence to present their problems and request a quick resolution.

Hemant Soren
Chief Minister, Jharkhand



Connect with your CM:

The Chief Minister has been extremely active on digital platforms such as Twitter, with people discussing the performance of government officials directly and openly. The Chief Minister also responds to people's problems by taking immediate action on these platforms and directing authorities to resolve the issues within the shortest possible timeframe and in the smoothest manner. The Soren government has been trying to bridge the gap between the people of the state and itself.

WOMEN ON THE RISE

A year ago when the Chief Minister took charge, he realized that women play a key role in strengthening the dynamism of human civilization. With this firm belief, Hon'ble Chief Minister Hemant Soren took multiple steps and launched schemes to help and support Women in the State.

An Initiative "Palash" brand Launched by the State Government, to market the local products that are being manufactured by Self Help groups across the state has been growing and shows great opportunity. More than 15 thousand women of Self Help Groups were also linked with ASHA (Livelihood Promotion Initiative) for diverse economic activities. Over 19000 women, associated with the sale of rice liquor have been linked to 'Phulo Jhano Ashirvaad Yojana', to foster dignified livelihoods.

HEALTHCARE FOR ALL

The ongoing covid-19 Pandemic has affected the entire world but the Jharkhand Government had prepared itself to roll the battle against COVID-19, even before the Central Government initiated the nationwide lockdown.

Currently, the Covid vaccination drive is ongoing and the Chief Minister Hemant Soren launched the Covid 19 vaccination in the State. Around 99.89 lakh people have been identified for vaccination in the state, including 1.23 lakh healthcare workers and military personnel are getting vaccinated in the first phase. About 2.5 lakh frontline workers are slated to receive the vaccine in the second phase. A total of 275 vaccine stores have been created across the state. Besides, the state government is planning to provide a digital vaccination certificate for those who receive the vaccine.

To counter COVID in its early stages the state government along with the state administration and the police force, nearly 6,000 doctors, 11,000 paramedical staff, 450 Ayush doctors and numerous civil society organizations rendered their valued services as COVID warriors. The Chief Minister directed the health department to set up an essential counter measures. As a result, 12,358 beds without oxygen, 2,021 beds with oxygen, 577 beds in ICU, and 642 ventilators were installed despite the limited resources.

Through the efforts of the government more than 4000 workers were brought back to the state through Shramik Special Trains and Airlift missions from across the country. It was a true display of grit on the part of the government.

The state government also ran 1,300 Dal Bhat centers, 6,595 Chief Minister Didi Kitchens across its 4500 Panchayats and more than 300 Community Kitchens feeding more than 5 lakhs people daily. Take home Rations were provided to mothers and children under all 38400 Anganwadi Centers. Jharkhand became one of the very few states to have started Plasma Therapy for COVID-19 treatment.

The Chief Minister's Critical Illness Treatment Scheme with coverage of Rs.

5 lakhs is being implemented for low-income households. Across the state, it has been instrumental in providing affordable and timely treatment of chronic and critical diseases like cancer, diabetes, and kidney disorder.

EDUCATION FOR ALL

Schools are not just centers of learning for children, but also vital to their social growth and cognitive development. The Covid-19 pandemic brought about a severe disruption in the education

system, especially in rural India. While schools and teachers in urban areas began a staggered transition to an online mode of classes.

As a first measure, The Chief Minister asked the schools and colleges to shift their mode of teaching from the physical to the digital platform. Gradually, online video conferencing platforms like Google Meet and Zoom became the de facto choice for students. The digital enablers of education steered by the state government ensured learning continuity and set the stage for the new normal in student-teacher interactions.

The Chief Minister recognises that co-curricular activities are intrinsic to overall academic growth and his vision is highlighted in the Sports Policy 2020 that plans to transform sports as a career rather than a leisure activity. Again, The State Government transformed 5,000 government schools into modern temples of learning—from the panchayat to the district level.

Along came a slew of new reforms and schemes to boost education within the state and raise the literacy rates. The government bolstered the integrated management information system, 'e-Vidhya Vahini', that maintains a database of all educational activities and records statewide.

Again, the Jharkhand Academic Council sprung into action and gave impetus to 'Akanksha', an initiative of the Jharkhand government that provides free engineering and medical coaching to students in government schools.

Also, in a bid to support meritorious students with financial assistance, the Jharkhand government has launched rewards for toppers from this year. As many as 47 students, who grabbed the top three positions in the state in Class 10 and 12 board examinations last year, received the reward, 13 of them from the Chief Minister himself.

TRIBAL FOCUS

Tribal welfare has been a core concern of the Chief Minister, He has a clear vision about the prosperity and wellbeing of the Tribal citizen in the state. As he has often remarked, Tribals are as important in our culture as our religion is, and the government must look after their well-being and ensure that no one is violating their fundamental rights.

Tribal education also requires a boost, and the Soren government has launched the Marang Gomke Jaipal Singh Munda Transnational Scholarship Scheme that will provide full scholarship for 10 students in the Scheduled Tribe category who want to pursue a Master's degree in the UK. The scholarship includes covering complete expenses towards

travel, accommodation, and living and tuition costs.

The State Government has also laid down plans to set up a Tribal university that will put Tribal culture, history and life centrestage. Recognizing that Tribal beliefs are independent of others, the Census 2021 will now give the option of 'Sarna Adivasi' as a separate religion after the Soren government passed a resolution in a special session of the Jharkhand Assembly.

EXPLORE NATURAL BEAUTY...

Jharkhand is a state with immense natural beauty. The name Jharkhand itself translates into "land of forests". There are only a few states that can compare to the mix of experience that this state offers. Jharkhand offers a colorful and hearty mix of tribal life, forest, and culture. with history running down from1000 BCE, Magadha kingdom and Mauryan empire.

The state government has taken some major initiatives to rejuvenate the state's hidden natural beauty into a world-class tourist destination. Total budgets of Rs 32000 Lakhs are being spent on the development of tourism, employment opportunities for the locals in the tourism sector, and overall development of the

Emerging Jharkhand
COME | EXPLORE | ENGAGE

RURAL ECONOMY RECEIVES A STRONG BOOST

3.5 lakh
women were added to 20,000 Sakhi Mandals in one year.

2,642 kms
Construction of road in progress under 631 State Rural Road Schemes in 2020-21.

1,151 projects
Work on covering a total of 3,690 km in progress under Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana in 2020-21.

₹16.55 cr
Total Interest free loans to be provided for setting up economic activities.

₹192.29 cr
were given to 1,28,186 Sakhi Mandals in the form of revolving fund in one year.

3,06,824 houses
Construction of houses under PM Awas Yojana Gramin taken up in 2020-21.

19,000 women
identified under Phulo Jhano Ashirvad Yojana to start dignified livelihoods.

sector. With the focus on Eco Tourism, the government's eco circuit project would also be launched with an estimated budget of Rs 52.72 crore.

The Government is also initiated new schemes like Dhurva Tribal Theme Park, Handicraft Tourism Centre in Dumka and Ranchi. Another three major ferry circuit is being launched Rajmahal -Sahebganj-Punai Chowk Ganga.

SPORTS

It is a land of immense talent, which gave the Indian cricket team one of the most beloved players former Captain Mahender Singh Dhoni, former Captain of Indian women's hockey team Ashunta Lakra, Indian archer Deepika Kumari

and Purnima Mahato. A new sports policy is being prepared to focus on the the welfare of sportspersons and the grassroots development of sports in Jharkhand. 24 District Sports Officers were appointed to ensure the development and implementation of sporting activities across the state. Direct recruitment of eligible sportspersons in State Government being undertaken.

The Chief Minister has recently announced financial aid of Rs.2.5 lakh each to four state archers and 2.7 lakh to a fifth archer. This is an attempt to help them and participate in the international competitions.

INDUSTRY

Jharkhand is the most resource-rich state in India. It holds the potential to become the industrial hub for the nation, a footing that it has not been able to achieve yet. But, in about a year of time, Hemant Soren's government has managed to attract 68 industrial units and created over 4000 jobs in return with the investment of Rs 579.79 Cr. A major project on the horizon is an investment of Rs 4951.56 in a pipeline which promises almost 4860 permanent jobs. A major contribution came from the textile industry which saw an investment of Rs 164.85 Cr with 2550 jobs and is expected to increase to another 8000 jobs.

The state is looking for a hyperbolic development with a focus on multiple sectors.

Jharkhand launches Urban Employment Scheme

Jharkhand becomes one of the first states to launch the Chief Minister Urban Workers Scheme with an aim to provide 100 days of guaranteed employment to semi-skilled and skilled workers in 51 urban conglomerates in Jharkhand. 5 lakh urban poor families including returning migrant workers will benefit from this opportunity.

'Sarkar Aapke Dwar' campaign relaunched from Dumka

Under the leadership of the Chief Minister, 'Sarkar Aapke Dwar' campaign was launched. The Chief Minister inaugurated 40 schemes worth 133 crores in Dumka and also distributed schematic benefits to people. Three new Operation Theatres and UltraSound Devices were commissioned at Phulo Jhano Medical College in Dumka.

The Honourable Chief Minister has been able to do all this and more just within 12 months of taking office. The people of Jharkhand have shown faith in their Chief Minister and the path of success and consistent growth on which he plans to lead the state. ■

Sadhana and Dev Anand in *Hum Dono*

THERE ARE MANY FUN SONGS, WITHOUT THE PAIN OF SEPARATION, WHERE THE LOVER ASKS THE BELOVED NOT TO GO, *'ABHI NA JAAO CHHODKAR, KE DIL ABHI BHARA NAHI* / DON'T GO YET AS MY HEART ISN'T YET SATIATED' (*HUM DONO*, 1961)

begins the early part of the story is *'Pi ke ghar aaj pyaari dulhaniya chali'*), where a beautiful young Nargis sets off but we know the wedding has mortgaged the family to the moneylender, so its sadness is not just about her parents but about the life we know she will live, as her beauty, hard work and love are not enough to save her family.

In *Saraswatichandra* (1968), Kumud sings *'Main to bhool chali babul ka des'* about how happy she is at her in-laws, but in the film, her husband drives her out of his house, even though his entire family want her to stay. Nevertheless, it allows her to meet her beloved Saraswatichandra again, even though she has to ask him to marry her sister as she is a widow.

Even though there is weeping in *'Babul jo tumne sikhaya'* in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (1994), it is quite a happy song though not as lively as the wedding song, *'Banno tera swagger'* in *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* (2015), all the fun of a wedding and none of the sadness of the goodbye song.

While beautiful sad songs beg the beloved not to go, from *'Aaj jaane ki zid na karo'* (Fayyaz Hashmi) to *'Pardesi pardesi jana nahi'* (*Raja Hindustani*, 1996), or to turn back *'O jane wale ho sake to laut ke aana'* (*Bandini*, 1963), there are many fun songs, without the pain of separation (*viraha*), where the lover asks the beloved not to go, *'Abhi na jao chhodkar, ke dil abhi bhara nahi* / Don't go yet as my heart isn't yet satiated' (*Hum Dono*, 1961), or where reunion (*milan*) is anticipated: *'Sayonara, vaada nibhaungi, ithlati aur balkhati kal phir aaungi sayonara* / Goodbye, I'll keep my promise and tomorrow will come dancing and swaying' (*Love in Tokyo*, 1966). My great favourite is the wonderful '*Bye bye Miss, goodnight, kal phir milenge* / Goodbye, miss, goodnight, we'll meet again tomorrow' (*Prem Nagar*, 1974).

As well as '*dard bhare geet*' (songs full of sorrow), there are joyful ones about breaking up such as 'Breakup song' in *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* (2016) or funny and rude variants such as *'Emotional atyachar'* (*Dev.D*, 2009) or '*Ja chudail*, Go to hell' (*Delhi Belly*, 2011).

The UK said goodbye to the European Union finally at the end of 2020. My husband has joined many others of Irish descent in a hello to the EU, by becoming an Irish and, hence, EU citizen. The Irish are known for their eloquence and no one says goodbye like them, invoking the wind, the sun and the rain:

May the road rise up to meet you,
may the wind be ever at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face
and the rain fall softly on your fields.
And until we meet again,
may God hold you in the hollow of his hand.

Wishing all readers a very happy goodbye to 2020 and to the coronavirus. ■

WHO'S NEXT?

In Rajya Sabha, Ghulam Nabi Azad is the leader of the Congress but is slated to retire in February. The Gandhi family has not been happy with him in recent times because of what is perceived as dissension. He was among those who signed the letter asking for reform in the party. Azad will most probably be replaced as leader, but who can that be? Anand Sharma, who is close to Sonia Gandhi, is also set to retire late March. He might be a possible name for the position. Otherwise, the buzz is that Mallikarjun Kharge is Rahul Gandhi's favoured candidate. He was leader of Lok Sabha earlier and is a Dalit leader. Jairam Ramesh and Digvijaya Singh are also in the race.

Constructive Dialogue

In a Parliamentary Consultative Committee meeting on external affairs, there was a major discussion between foreign minister S Jaishankar and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. Jaishankar was pleased about the interaction. First, because Gandhi doesn't come for the meetings regularly, but this time was present with other leaders of his party like Shashi Tharoor and Anand Sharma. Jaishankar replied to all of Gandhi's questions and gave the Government's perspective on various issues like the border aggression of China, why Russia and other countries needed to be focussed on apart from the US and China, etcetera. Gandhi said that it was a bipolar world but Jaishankar disagreed with the idea. Gandhi also questioned Jaishankar over India's Covid diplomacy.

MOVING TO UP

In 2014, when Narendra Modi became prime minister, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) had two important hands. One was PK Mishra, now principal secretary, a Gujarat cadre Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer. The other person close to Modi was AK Sharma, who was more junior. Sharma subsequently moved out of the PMO to become the secretary of the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises. He then took voluntary retirement and was to join BJP later. It was said he would be made a member of the Legislative Council in Uttar Pradesh. Modi apparently has told UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath that he wanted Sharma to be given greater responsibilities, especially for the Assembly election next year. Sharma could even be deputy chief minister if BJP comes back to power in the state.

Illustrations by **SAURABH SINGH**

Health Politics

In West Bengal, the politics of health is playing out. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had announced a Swasthya Sathi health insurance scheme for all in the state. While BJP State President Dilip Ghosh is criticising it as an election gimmick, in every district, there is a long queue to enroll in the scheme. Interestingly, relatives of Ghosh in his own village, including his brothers, joined the scheme.

More Phases

Last time the West Bengal election took place in six phases. This time, the Election Commission might have seven, eight or possibly even nine phases to maintain order. They have been having discussions with both the state and the Centre. The election dates are going to be announced in February. They want to conclude the election by early May and have a new government in that month. An issue facing them is the deployment of paramilitary forces. There is a scarcity because the home ministry cannot withdraw forces from Kashmir, Northeast and Maoist areas. But the possibility of political violence in Bengal looms large and so the ministry feels paramilitary forces are needed in large numbers. Last time, these forces depended on the state police to function because they didn't know the topography of the villages and districts. This time, the home ministry is planning to send paramilitary forces earlier so that they are well in position by election day.

New Bengal Voter

BJP's Rajya Sabha member and columnist Swapan Dasgupta is now very active in West Bengal election politics. He is said to have now become a voter in the state. Earlier, as a resident of Delhi, he voted there. Apparently, the BJP's central leadership told Dasgupta to make the change because to fight the political battle in Bengal, it was important to be a voter there. Another gossip says that Dasgupta became a Bengal voter because he might be a chief ministerial possibility after the election.

PLANNING THE 75TH

The 75th year of India's independence is 2022 and Modi is said to be working on a plan to have celebrations for one year starting this August 15th. Different ministries will have their programmes and BJP too will have its own separate celebrations. There might also be a move to use these celebrations to correct a popular perception that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh did not participate in the freedom movement.

THE SON ALSO RISES

Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) leader MK Stalin's son Udhayanidhi Stalin, a Tamil movie star, is becoming an active figure in the party since formally joining it last year. So when Rahul Gandhi visited Tamil Nadu and attended a *jallikattu* event, Udhayanidhi was seen with him. In the coming Assembly election, he will play an important role for DMK.

By AUDREY TRUSCHKE

SANSKRIT WITH A PERSIAN ACCENT

It's a language of the Muslim pasts too

IN AUGUST 2018, violent nationalists prevented me from delivering an academic lecture on premodern Indian history in Hyderabad in southern India. A few weeks before the scheduled event, self-described members of Hindu nationalist groups—including the Bajrang Dal, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—wrote letters to the police threatening violence if I were to take the stage. The police refused to provide protection, which I sometimes need to speak in India and even in the West. And so the lecture, titled 'Unpopular Stories' in a nice bit of unintentional irony, was cancelled over my objections. The silencing of academic voices is an increasingly common outcome in India, where a political swerve to the hard right has been accompanied by a feverish devotion to a bastardized vision of India's past. In short, Indian right-wingers are trying to cook the history books. This means that historians—who call out such shenanigans by insisting on evidence, solid arguments and professional ethics—face mounting pressure to remain mute. Sometimes the bullying works, such as in Hyderabad, but other times it does not work.

I cannot promise that the narratives I share in what follows will be anymore or less popular than those I was prevented from sharing in Hyderabad. But I can reasonably predict that the stories I resurrect here—many of them long tucked away in old, little-read Sanskrit texts—will surprise you, dear reader. For while the premodern Indian past is vibrantly alive and debated in modern times, premodern Sanskrit historical writings remain largely inaccessible and unknown to all but specialists. Even scholars partial to reading premodern Sanskrit texts may find that I analyse stories in unexpected ways and so bring out aspects of the Sanskrit tradition that are usually overlooked. The lack of visibility of Sanskrit histories of Muslim-led rule, to my colleagues and to a general audience, is part of the reason why I decided to write about this subject. This robust body of narrative texts expands our historical and conceptual resources for understanding Sanskrit literature, early modern history and premodern and modern Indian identities.

I present and analyse a hitherto overlooked group of histories on Indo-Persian political events, namely, a few dozen Sanskrit texts that date from the 1190s until 1721. As soon as Muslim political figures established themselves in northern India in the 1190s—when the Ghurids overthrew the Chauhans and ruled part of northern India from Delhi—Indian intellectuals wrote about that political development in Sanskrit. Indian men (and at least one woman) produced dozens of Sanskrit texts on Indo-Persian political events. These works span Delhi Sultanate and Mughal rule, including works that deal with Deccan sultanates and Muslim-led polities in the subcontinent's deep south. India's premodern learned elite only ceased to write on Indo-Muslim powers in Sanskrit when the Mughal Empire began to fracture beyond repair in the early eighteenth century. In other words, Sanskrit writers produced histories of Indo-Muslim rule—meaning political power wielded over parts of the Indian subcontinent by people who happened to be Muslim—throughout nearly the entire time span of that political experience. [I seek], for the first time, to collect, analyse and theorize Sanskrit histories of Muslim-led rule and, later, as Muslims became an integral part of the Indian cultural

AN ILLUSTRATION TO *AKBARNAMA* DEPICTING RANTHAMBHOR KING RAI SURJAN HADA SUBMITTING TO EMPEROR AKBAR, BY MUGHAL COURT ARTISTS MUKUND AND SHANKAR, C 1590

WHILE THE PREMODERN INDIAN PAST IS VIBRANTLY ALIVE AND DEBATED IN MODERN TIMES, PREMODERN SANSKRIT HISTORICAL WRITINGS REMAIN LARGELY INACCESSIBLE AND UNKNOWN TO ALL BUT SPECIALISTS. THE LACK OF VISIBILITY OF SANSKRIT HISTORIES OF MUSLIM-LED RULE IS PART OF THE REASON WHY I DECIDED TO WRITE ABOUT THIS SUBJECT

and political worlds, Indo-Muslim rule as a body of historical materials. My main focus remains on historiography or history writing, more than political history (although there is more than a little of that too in these pages). This new archive has wide-reaching implications for specialist scholarship on premodern South Asia. Among other things, these works lend insight into formulations and expressions of premodern political, social, cultural and religious identities. Given the current political climate where nationalist claims are often grounded on fabricated visions of India's premodernity, [my work] also contributes to ongoing debates in the Indian public sphere.

LITERARY HISTORIES

Premodern Indians wrote Sanskrit histories within a variety of literary genres, including *ākhyāna, akhyāyikā, charita, paṭṭāvalī, prabandha, praśasti, rājāvalī, vaṃśāvalī, vijaya, vṛtta* and, perhaps most importantly, *kāvya*. Others have analysed individual texts as kavya, as prabandha, and so forth, and those analyses have proved fruitful to pursuing questions about literary styles, Jain religious narratives and more. I cite such studies throughout [my work]. But from where I stand, genre is not a useful leading interpretive lens because there is no single Sanskrit genre that allows me to group together Sanskrit histories of Muslim-led rule. My claim that certain Sanskrit texts are histories is not exclusive; they are many other things also. But considering them as histories allows us to do things with these works and talk about them in ways that we have not done so previously.

Sanskrit histories of Indo-Muslim rule constitute a fragmented tradition, meaning that the authors did not generally build upon or even read one another. Within regional branches of this tradition, things were more connected. For instance, the later Kashmiri rajatarangini authors modelled their works on earlier text(s) of the same title. Gujarati prabandha authors sometimes read each other's compositions. But, overwhelmingly, I have little evidence that the premodern intellectuals even knew about prior Sanskrit histories of Indo-Muslim rule. Some cite earlier political narratives about non-Muslim rulers, most commonly the Mahabharata and Kalidasa's Raghuvaṃśa

(Raghu's Lineage, c. fifth century), another foundational text of Sanskrit literature. It remains an open question whether Sanskrit history writing, in general, was boosted by the rise of Indo-Persian rule. But at the very least, instead of disrupting Sanskrit interest in writing about the past or continuing a pre-existing 'wilful amnesia' regarding political facts, as some scholars have suggested, Indo-Muslim rule provided creative fodder for numerous Sanskrit thinkers who elected to write about instantiations of Indo-Muslim power. That Sanskrit intellectuals kept reinventing this wheel underscores their deep and abiding interest, across time and space, in writing about political events, including of the Indo-Muslim variety. In so doing, premodern intellectuals judged Sanskrit literature, time and time again, as appropriate and efficacious for commenting on real-world political developments.

Premodern Indian historians chose to write about political reality against the backdrop of possibly the most extensive set of myths in existence, waiting to be retold. A premodern Sanskrit poet could always rework Krishna stories, or craft another Ramayana, or invent a tale entirely. And many did these things, including several of the poet-historians. In the texts that occupy my attention, premodern thinkers focus on historically verifiable events as something meaningful to write about in their presents. In so doing, they evince a 'historical consciousness'. Like modern historians, premoderns were selective in their narratives, only sharing details as relevant to their interests in a given text. Contrary to the mistaken views of even some sophisticated thinkers, historians, be they modern or premodern, do not seek 'to bare the past completely'. For our part, we—similar to our premodern counterparts—focus a given narrative in a book, a journal article or, increasingly, a Twitter thread according to a set of criteria depending on what we want to know and thereby leave out many (we think) irrelevant details. Sometimes, premodern Sanskrit thinkers seem less interested in brute accuracy and more interested in twisting the facts, a trend in premodern historical traditions across the world. Still, Sanskrit historians evince (to varying degrees, admittedly) 'interest in facts', which distinguishes their historical narratives, in my modern eyes, from premodern Sanskrit mythology.

ELITE DIVERSITY

Sanskrit histories of Indo-Muslim rule embody considerable geographic, political and religious diversity. The authors hailed from all corners of the Indian subcontinent, from Kashmir to Tamil Nadu and from Gujarat to Bengal. They worked across nearly as broad an area. Many texts were written by court poets, working for Muslim and Hindu kings; the works' writers and patrons also include merchants, religious leaders and other non-imperial actors. Both Brahmins and Jains number among the authors. Brahmins get plenty of attention in contemporary Sanskrit scholarship, but Jains are often relegated to footnotes, literally. More than one scholar has repeated and so entrenched a Brahmin-centric view of the premodern Sanskrit tradition in which Jains are presented as interlopers rather than full participants. By putting Jains and Brahmins on equal footing, I make a small contribution to the larger project of calling out and undermining Brahminical claims to define Sanskrit intellectual production, an issue that contemporary Sanskrit studies has not left in the past.

GETTY IMAGES

While Sanskrit histories of Indo-Muslim rule are diverse in some ways, their authors were elite in terms of language, gender and social status. These poet-historians all wrote in Sanskrit or (in a few cases) Prakrit, a set of Sanskrit-adjacent literary mediums, languages unknown to the vast majority of Indians, past and present. The authors were nearly all men. A sole historical text considered here was authored by a woman (Gangadevi's *Madhurāvijaya*), a small bit of diversity that, while important, points up the overarching gender exclusion that defined premodern Sanskrit textual production. The authors were often high caste and, following the tight link between gender and caste, many express extreme levels of misogyny and casteism in their histories. They are unapologetic about all of this. Exclusivity and privilege structured premodern Sanskrit intellectual culture and the social spheres in which it operated, which in turn informed what people chose to say in Sanskrit. Again, I will give away something of my findings: elite authors often express harsh, elite ideas. I present these with an unvarnished gaze and attempt to contextualize premodern views, no matter how distasteful and bigoted we may find them today. Brahminical privilege is one notion to which I

ADHAI DIN KA JHONPRA MOSQUE IN AJMER, RAJASTHAN

MUSLIMS IDENTIFIED THEMSELVES AND WERE DESCRIBED BY SANSKRIT INTELLECTUALS ACCORDING TO TERMS AND NORMS THAT WERE OFTEN BASED ON CULTURE, REGION AND EVEN PSEUDO-ETHNICITY RATHER THAN RELIGION

return several times, because it was a borderline obsession among several authors (e.g., Jayanaka, Jonaraja and several writers working for Rajput and Maratha courts). We also see recurrent attention given to Kshatriya kingship, a flexible institution that rulers and intellectuals defined in many different ways. Being a Kshatriya ruler was, for most thinkers, a varna distinction and typically involved certain kinds of relations with Brahmins. But for numerous premodern Sanskrit thinkers, the advent and expansion of Indo-Muslim rule provided new foils for thinking about what it could mean to be a Kshatriya king or warrior. Some of the results were stunning. For instance, writing in the fifteenth century, Nayachandra upholds a Muslim Mongol, somebody outside of the varna system, as an exemplar of Kshatriya heroism. Writing in the sixteenth century, Chandrashekhara lauds as an ideal Kshatriya king a man who neither ruled nor fought for himself. There remained more traditional views as well, such as Paramananda's seventeenth-century vision of a Kshatriya ruler who took every conceivable action to assist Brahmins. Although, arguably, even Paramananda was innovative in his historical context, since the Kshatriya ruler in question was widely believed to have been born a Shudra. Instead of Kshatriya kingship, some thinkers reworked other kinds of local and sectarian identities in the context of Indo-Muslim rule, sometimes through contrast and other times through likening. Over time, Sanskrit poet-historians made a general move away from seeing Muslim political figures as Other, although the trajectory approximates a windy path more than a smooth arc. In short, within their elite diversity, India's traditional learned men cultivated a rather astonishing number of ways to write about Indo-Muslim political history and the key figures therein, and to articulate the relevance of this past for their communities.

I did not set out looking for diversity, even elite diversity, and so I think it is worth reflecting briefly on how I found it. I articulated a different set of questions than most modern Sanskritists. In recent and ongoing research, a few other modern Sanskrit scholars have similarly highlighted alternative and minority voices precisely through formulating their research questions in innovative ways. There is a lesson here about the need to expand the topics that we study in modern Western Indology as a way to see underappreciated aspects of the premodern Sanskrit tradition. But there is another issue, too, which is that by being a woman I stand apart from most modern Sanskritists. As Anand Venkatkrishnan described the field's jaw-dropping lack of gender representation in 2019, 'If you encounter Sanskrit scholarship in America, you're likely to find it littered with men, a patriarchal lineage rivaling that of any Sanskrit epic.' Writing in 2018 and positioned outside the field, Karla Mallette called out the inexcusable dominance of male authors, who constituted over 90 percent of authors in a 2014 edited volume on Sanskrit literature. She noted, powerfully, that the erasure of female agency in modern times mirrored its premodern counterpart in Sanskrit erotic poetry: 'Women are there, yet they are not actors. Perhaps this is not striking given the fact that the majority of the texts discussed in the book were premodern. But even the scholars who contribute to the [2014] book are men.' Homogeneity rarely provides fertile ground for creativity. And so, perhaps, our failure to see different viewpoints in premodern Sanskrit begins at home, in our failure.

NOT WRITING ABOUT HINDU-MUSLIM CONFLICT

Sanskrit thinkers wrote about both the political violence and cross-cultural relations associated with Indo-Muslim kings. These two aspects are correlated since the advent and expansion of Indo-Muslim rule, achieved in large part through force, created social and cultural conditions that allowed for exchanges across literary, linguistic, religious and cultural lines. But the violence, in particular, sits ill with many people today. Especially striking to modern eyes are accounts of total annihilation, where one political dynasty destroyed another, which pop up several times during the first few centuries in which Sanskrit thinkers wrote about Muslim-led polities, roughly 1190 through 1420. Speaking of fourteenth-century poetry concerning political violence enacted by Indo-Muslim polities in southern India, Ajay Rao wrote, '[These violent narratives] are painful to read, sometimes depicting violence in graphic detail, and are filled with images that may lead many of us to avert our eyes.' Some historians, such as Taymiya Zaman, are doing important, innovative work that investigates and

wrestles with modern emotions about the past. Elsewhere, I have confronted and reflected upon my own encounters with the emotionally charged rants and violent threats of those who promote the hateful ideology of Hindutva. I offer something a tad more conventional here, which is a non-injury-based framework that empowers us to interpret premodern narratives of political violence on their own terms rather than through a contemporary emotive lens.

FOR THOSE WHO are interested in understanding what Sanskrit historical narratives of violence meant for those who crafted and read them in premodernity, Sanskrit literary norms of depicting bloodshed serve as our bedrock. Premodern Sanskrit poets and readers shared a nearly insatiable appetite for gore. They relished images of ghosts traversing battlefields crisscrossed by rivers of human blood, animals feasting on the entrails of the newly dead, decapitated bodies spurting blood as they staggered about tripping over fallen corpses, and the like. Such repulsive imagery was poetry in premodern Sanskrit, theorized under the aesthetic emotions of fear (*bhaya*), the macabre (*bībhatsa*) and revulsion (*jugupsā*). Also, the ability to enact gratuitous carnage demonstrated political authority. In many cases, Sanskrit depictions of Muslim-enacted political violence also reflected reality. After all, when Muslim would-be rulers showed up on the subcontinent, they proved no exception to the general rule that premodern Indian politics was a bloody affair. That said, those primed to find Muslim-enacted atrocities in India's past (generally as a doomed attempt to justify their unjustifiable hatred of Muslims in India's present) should note that material evidence furnishes a mixed picture of Hindu-Muslim interaction and exchange, even in the early days of Indo-Muslim rule. Sanskrit texts give us only one perspective in hard-history terms. More relevant to my purposes here is that, in textualized accounts of violence, Sanskrit intellectuals treated Muslim political figures no differently than other sorts of subcontinental political actors. Sanskrit thinkers used violent imagery to integrate Muslim political figures within traditional Sanskrit ways of expressing political power, including through showcasing martial strength.

While Sanskrit thinkers wrote a lot about violence, it was not the communal violence, largely of Hindutva extremists attacking Muslims, that plagues India today. It is unclear that the Hindu-Muslim binary was operative—or that both of its constituent parts even existed—for much of the second millennium CE. As many scholars have pointed out, 'Hindu' is a Perso-Arabic term, not a Sanskrit word, and its premodern uses often refer to residents of India ('Indians' in modern terminology). The earliest usage of 'Hindu' in Sanskrit dates to the mid-fourteenth century, more than six hundred years after the earliest Sanskrit texts and inscriptions that mention Muslims. Even after the 1350s, 'Hindu' was more commonly used by Muslims writing in Persian rather than by anybody—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Rajput, Jain, etc—writing in Sanskrit. Muslims, too, identified themselves and were described by Sanskrit intellectuals according to terms and norms that were often based on culture, region and even pseudo-ethnicity rather than religion. Richard Eaton has argued, rather persuasively, that we ought to understand Indo-Muslim rulers as participants in Persianate culture, which was grounded in a prestige language and model of political power rather than religion. I concur, even if I choose to subsume that, in terms of vocabulary, within a broad category of Muslim-led rule.

THE EARLIEST USAGE OF 'HINDU' IN SANSKRIT DATES TO THE MID-FOURTEENTH CENTURY, MORE THAN SIX HUNDRED YEARS AFTER THE EARLIEST SANSKRIT TEXTS AND INSCRIPTIONS THAT MENTION MUSLIMS. EVEN AFTER THE 1350S, 'HINDU' WAS MORE COMMONLY USED BY MUSLIMS WRITING IN PERSIAN RATHER THAN BY ANYBODY—BRAHMIN, KSHATRIYA, RAJPUT, JAIN, ETC—WRITING IN SANSKRIT

The Hindu-Muslim binary assumes the primacy of religious identities, which is arguably inaccurate in many instances in modernity and certainly so in premodernity. In short, to talk about Hindu-Muslim violence in premodern India is an anachronism. As Eric Hobsbawm reminds us, 'The most usual ideological abuse of history is based on anachronism rather than lies.' Sometimes I think that term—anachronism—cloaks in scholarly language the fear, oppression and violence fuelled by crudely misreading the past through the lens of the present. There are serious stakes, in terms of human livelihoods and lives, in current politico-ideological abuses of premodern Indian history. Historians ought to call out the factual paucity of Hindutva narratives that insert Hindu-Muslim conflict into India's past, and some of us do so regularly. I advance a parallel project of cultivating alternative, historically grounded frameworks to the modern categories of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' that might serve us better in making sense of conflicts and narratives thereof in premodern India and also might add nuance to those modern categories. ■

This is an edited excerpt from The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Muslim Pasts *by Audrey Truschke (Allen Lane; 408 pages; Rs 699). Truschke is assistant professor of South Asian history at Rutgers University, US*

Unparalleled UNBIASED Cutting edge CONTENT

Open the most sought after weekly magazine

Read

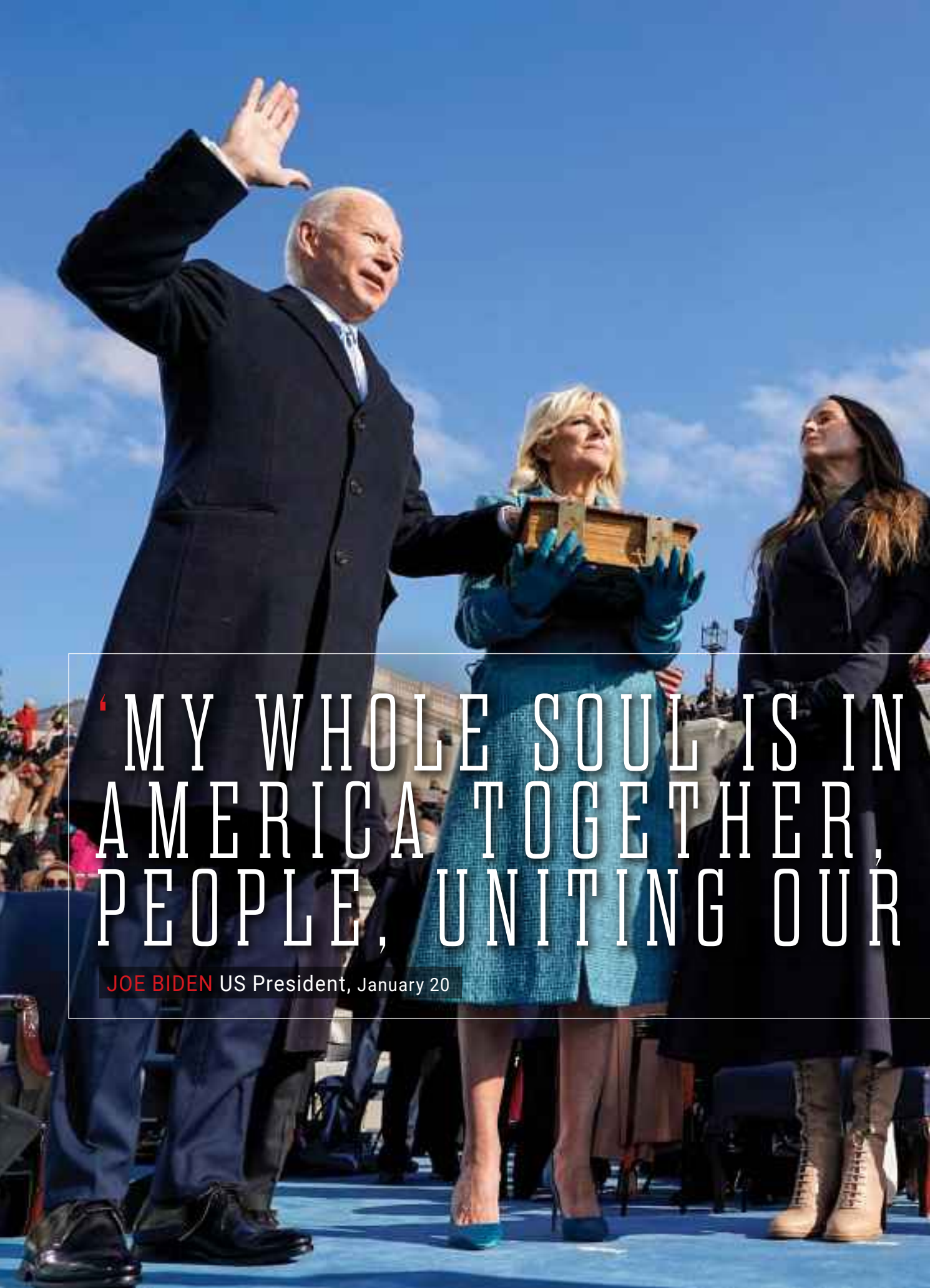
OPEN

[No one makes an argument better than us]

www.openthemagazine.com | To subscribe, 'openmag' to 9999800012

openthemagazine | openthemag

Available as an e-magazine for tablets, mobiles and desktops via Magzter



‘MY WHOLE SOUL IS IN AMERICA. TOGETHER, PEOPLE, UNITING OUR

JOE BIDEN US President, January 20

BRINGING UNITING OUR NATION'

Joe Biden being sworn in as the 46th president of the US at the Capitol in Washington, January 20

Photo **AP**

ITUDE OR THE DURATION
DY ATTAINED - NEITHER
CAUSE OF THE CONFLICT
EVEN BEFORE THE CON-
EASE - EACH LOOKED FOR
ND A RESULT LESS FUN-
NDING - BOTH READ THE
TO THE SAME GOD AND
D AGAINST THE OTHER-
THAT ANY MEN SHOULD
GOD'S ASSISTANCE IN
AD FROM THE SWEAT OF
UT LET US JUDGE NOT
ED - THE PRAYERS OF BOTH
RED - THAT OF NEITHER
FULLY - THE ALMIGHTY
S - "WOE UNTO THE WORLD
OR IT MUST NEEDS BE
BUT WOE TO THAT MAN
SE COMETH -"
GOD WILLS THAT IT
THE WEALTH PILED
TWO HUNDRED AN
REQUITED TOIL SH
UNTIL EVERY DROP
THE LASH SHALL
DRAWN WITH THE SW
THOUSAND YEARS
BE SAID "THE JUD
ARE TRUE AND RIG
WITH MALICE TOW
FOR ALL WITH FIRM
GOD GIVES US TO S
STRIVE ON TO FINISH
TO BIND UP THE NA
FOR HIM WHO SHALL
TLE AND FOR HIS WI
TO DO ALL WHICH M
ISH A JUST AND LA
OURSELVES AND W

Photo GETTY IMAGES

Joe Biden at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, January 20

BIDEN THE CIVIL

THERE IS A SENSE OF A GREAT NATIONAL CLEANSING AND REALIGNMENT

By TUNKU VARADARAJAN in New York

Don't tell my wife that I'm telling you this, but she sobbed at many moments during the inaugural ceremony on January 20th for Joseph Robinette Biden Jr, the 46th president of the US. Even as my son and I giggled (quietly) over his foppish French middle name, she teared up. I asked her later what had made her react that way, and she offered a stream of words: Pride. Happiness. Catharsis. Celebration. Euphoria. Relief.

Relief. I heard that word from many other Americans to whom I spoke after Biden had been sworn in. Sworn in, let us note, at the very building where only a fortnight earlier a horde of hooligans and insurrectionists—not simple yahoos, lest you be misled by the way some of them were costumed—had run rampant and unchecked. I confess to the world that *I* had wept on that day. My words to explain why?

GETTY IMAGES

Donald Trump boards Marine One as he leaves the White House, January 20

Astonishment. Consternation. Alarm. Panic. Anger. Impotence.

Let no one tell you that the fear and rage felt on January 6th by civil America—and by civil people everywhere in the world—wasn't real. And let no one tell you that the balm and elation felt on January 20th by civil America—and by civil people everywhere in the world—wasn't real as well.

The word 'civil' needs no explanation. Those who know and love the quality will intuit what I mean by it. It is not an ideological word. You can be a civil conservative and a civil liberal. You cannot be a civil bigot or a civil bully. You can be a civil tax-cutter and a civil welfare-statist. You cannot be a civil inciter of insurrections.

After four years of Donald Trump, America wants—no, craves—a civil president. It's not just a matter of style, or aesthetics. The incivility of the Trump era was soiling America's soul. The incivility wasn't confined to Trump, although he was the shit-flinger-in-chief. It was contagious, and spread to his opponents—though mercifully not to Biden, or so it seemed. (During the election campaign, Biden wisely chose to be taciturn, letting Trump defeat himself.) American politics under Trump turned into mortal combat, a Manichean machine-gunning by each side—Republican and Democrat—of the other. In his inaugural address, Biden described this as "uncivil war," even as he called for its immediate end.

A large part of the relief that comes with Trump's departure—my wife's relief, mine, and that of millions of others—is that the uncivil war will end for the most part merely by virtue of his departure. So petulant was his exit from Washington—so picayune his spurning of the niceties of transitional tradition—that his flight out of town was met with a giant and joyous blast of satisfaction. To see three past presidents—Messrs Clinton, Bush, and Obama—at the inauguration ceremony, and to see Trump's own vice president, Mike Pence, vilified by his own boss but upright and thick-skinned enough not to care, was sufficient to reassure America that the machinery of civility had suffered little lasting damage. Trump's absence, in truth, was a blessing. His very presence, with its anti-democratic aura and its reek of insurrection, would have been enough to curdle the ceremony. Can you imagine the camera panning to Trump as Biden spoke—perhaps when he uttered his words about "systemic racism" (about whose existence good people can disagree)—and catching the man from Mar-a-Lago in mid-smirk? Or in a tawdry shake of the head or eye-roll? And what would Trump have made of Amanda Gorman, the young poet, with her righteous, rap-like rhythms? Would he even have worn a mask?

There was a sense at the inaugural of a great national cleansing and realignment. Pence, erstwhile Senate leader Mitch McConnell, and other Republicans present there, represent the frontline of the party's own battle against Trump, now made easier to win by Trump himself. His obsession with a stolen election resulted in the loss of two Republican Senate seats in Georgia—and with that, a loss of control to the Democrats of the Senate itself. Then came his incendiary speech in Washington on January 6th, followed by a storming of the US Capitol, his second impeachment, and his snubbing of the inaugural—a late-in-life CV packed with malice and misbehaviour that should render him forever a pariah. He speaks now of founding his own party. Yet he doesn't have Twitter (a prohibition with which I disagree, for the record), and has much less support from the Fox News Channel than he used to: It is hard to make political advances (even for a man of Trump's talents in these matters) without any presence in the mainstream media or social platforms. Trump is also ageing, indebted, and braced for lawsuits. And the Senate may yet disbar him from running for president in 2024. It's hard to see him summoning the ammo for a brand new war of subversion.

All focus now is on Biden. America has a yearning not merely for civility but also for adult competence. More than 400,000 Americans have died from Covid-19—Xi Jinping's gift to the world—and the country watched as its president floundered. Trump, a man bereft of scientific temper, left America to its own devices in a time of grave pandemic. His ideology-fuelled anti-scientism flooded the arena of public health, putting millions of Americans at risk. His administration made little attempt to observe and emulate the successes of other, less 'exceptional' countries in their war against Covid. Biden is now left with the job of repelling a virus that's had a year to embed in America.

The country wants a president with discipline. A president who delegates. A president who can keep a cabinet intact. A president who doesn't tweet from the hip. A president who believes that he serves the people. A president who doesn't see himself as a messiah. A president who will rejoin the world outside. A president who will heed the needs of all Americans, not just those of his partisans. A president who is always calm, sometimes bland, always open-minded, sometimes in doubt. A president who remembers that America is a nation of immigrants. A president who talks to the world without scorning it.

America wants a president who will make America... America again. ■

Tunku Varadarajan is a fellow at New York University Law School's Classical Liberal Institute

"The beauty of the written word; a story well told.

The luxury of immersing myself in myriad lives; journeying to faraway lands.

I am obsessed. And the Reviews in Open help me discover the best.

A quiet corner. An interesting book. Life's good!"

Sanjay Malik, Dubai

OPEN

www.openthemagazine.com

Tell us why you read Open

openthemagazine

A NEW UNCERTAINTY

By BRAHMA CHELLANEY

At 78, Joe Biden is the oldest president in US history to assume office. The unprecedented security at his inauguration, which included neutralising any possible insider threat from National Guardsmen and police officers at the ceremony, underscored the new president's challenges. Biden has come to power with about one-third of the American voters believing he stole the election, with the US Congress almost evenly divided between the two parties, and with America reeling from the rampaging spread of the coronavirus.

Biden's biggest foreign-policy challenge relates to the world's economic and geopolitical hub— the Indo-Pacific region, which unites the Indian and Pacific oceans. An expansionist China is injecting greater instability and tensions in the Indo-Pacific through its territorial and maritime revisionism and heavy-handed use of economic and military power.

The increasingly polarised and virulent US politics, however, will likely weigh down Biden's agenda. Before the election, according to one survey, nearly 90 per cent of supporters of Biden and his rival Donald Trump believed that the opponent's victory would bring lasting harm to America.

Indeed, Trump left office refusing to concede the election. He repeatedly alleged that the election was marred by fraud and irregularities and thus illegitimate. To be sure, Trump's 2016 election victory was never accepted by many prominent Democrats, who sought to delegitimise his presidency by spinning a tale of his "collusion" with Russia. A partisan national media served as an echo chamber for the Russia-collusion story. Today, the base of the Republican Party reveres Trump even in defeat.

Biden has talked about unifying a divided America. But he has taken little concrete action thus far in that direction.

Joe Biden and Kamala Harris (right) in the President's Room of the Capitol Building after the inauguration ceremony, January 20

The momentum towards deeper US-India strategic collaboration could slow if Joe Biden's foreign policy returns to an accommodationist approach towards China

GETTY IMAGES

It will not be easy to heal the wounds after the recent developments, including the Trump-supporting mob's storming of the US Capitol, the rushed second impeachment of Trump in the House of Representatives after just a four-hour debate, and Big Tech's open display of its political leanings by targeting Trump and his supporters and by shutting down Twitter's rapidly growing rival, Parler. After being kicked off US servers, Parler has been forced to turn to a Russian firm that routes internet traffic.

As William Barr, who served as the US attorney general until December 2020, has warned, "I think that when you start suppressing free speech, when people lose confidence in the media, and also when they lose faith in the integrity of elections, you're going to have some people resort to violence." Anger has deepened among conservatives, especially among many of the 74 million who voted for Trump and whose belief in a stolen election is now etched in their psyches.

The US is being torn apart by hyper-partisan politics. Tolerance for opposing views is increasingly in short supply. In this environment, fake news, conspiracy theories, fear-mongering and alternative narratives thrive. What keeps the US strong, though, is institutional resilience. Hardened polarisation hasn't really dented national institutions, which remain by and large effective in helping to insulate the country's economy and security from the effects of partisan politics.

Yet, there is a high risk that, like his predecessor, Biden in office could become an increasingly polarising figure, with Americans either loving or loathing him. Trump's supporters already hate Biden. In fact, just as Democrats spent four years seeking to tar Trump with a Russia-collusion story, hardcore conservatives are already calling Biden the "Manchurian candidate" who, to quote the prominent right-wing commentator Mark Levin, was "bought and paid for by China."

To compound matters, the new president's decades-long political career shows that he has no firm convictions. Indeed, during the presidential election campaign, Biden made a habit of reversing his positions on major policy issues. Flip-flops are to Biden what egomania was to Trump as president.

FOREIGN POLICY UNDER BIDEN

Biden says he intends to reshape US foreign policy, including by shoring up alliances and by rejoining the Paris climate accord and the World Health Organization. But the "one America, two nations" problem at home could impinge on Biden's foreign-policy agenda, as it did on Trump's.

Trump pursued a strange mix of avowed isolationism, impul-

AP

WILL BIDEN BE ABLE TO BUILD ON THE MOMENTUM AND FORMALISE A SOFT ALLIANCE WITH NEW DELHI? CHINESE AGGRESSION IN THE HIMALAYAS HAS CREATED A SIGNIFICANT OPENING FOR WASHINGTON

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with then US Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State John Kerry in Washington, September 30, 2014

sive interventionism and unexpected resort to force, as in early 2020 when the US assassinated General Qasem Soleimani, the head of Iran's commando Quds Force. Trump's critics rejoiced over Soleimani's killing because they had been slamming his foreign-policy approach of relying largely on economic levers by rebuffing the preference of the US "deep state" for periodically employing military force to assert American power.

Trump, who railed against "endless wars," was the first US president since Jimmy Carter not to start a new war. Trump ended the CIA's large covert operation in Syria and worked to bring back home US troops from various theatres of conflict. But his itch to withdraw US forces from Afghanistan led him to cut a deal with the terrorist Taliban, handing Pakistan a major victory. Consequently, the old US-Pakistan-Taliban alliance is back in play in Afghanistan, with Washington's Faustian bargain with the Taliban spawning an escalating wave of targeted killings.

Against this background, how will Biden's foreign policy be different? Biden has promised to pursue a more predictable and multilateral approach and to help unite allies in concerted action on issues ranging from climate change to Russia and China. But few seem to clearly know Biden's thinking on major geostrategic issues.

In the presidential campaign, Biden's theme essentially was that he wasn't Trump. Biden made the election a referendum on the incumbent rather than a choice. Yet, without having a political base or articulating a clear vision, Biden won. In victory, the Democrats are trying to figure out what they stand for as a party. But the division between progressives and establishment forces runs deep in the party.

One thing seems certain: Despite Biden's multilateralism rhetoric, he is likely to be more interventionist than Trump. In fact, most members of Biden's national security team are considered "liberal interventionists," or hawks on the left. It was the liberal interventionists who, under President Barack Obama, engineered the disastrous interventions in Libya and Syria and who, during the Bill Clinton presidency, spearheaded the NATO air war against Yugoslavia.

Biden's protégé and now Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, supported the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the 2011 intervention in Libya, both of which turned the once-stable countries into failed states. Blinken hailed America's occupation of Iraq as a success, claiming it had brought down violence and won grassroots support. As his critics point out, there isn't a war that Blinken hasn't loved.

Jake Sullivan, Biden's National Security Advisor, supported supplying anti-tank missiles to Ukraine, which President Obama opposed and President Trump finally delivered.

On China, however, the otherwise hawkish Sullivan has been an advocate of a conciliatory approach. For example, during a 2017 lecture he delivered on behalf of the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, Sullivan said foreign policy expert Owen Harries was "right" to warn that "containment" is a self-defeating policy, much like acquiescence. "We need to strike a middle course—one that encourages China's rise in a manner consistent with an open, fair, rules-based, regional order," Sullivan declared. He said the China policy needs to be about more than just bilateral ties, "it needs to be about our ties to the region that create an environment more conducive to a peaceful and positive sum Chinese rise."

More recently, Sullivan co-authored an essay in the journal *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2019) with Kurt Campbell, Biden's "Indo-Pacific coordinator"—a new position inside the National Security Council. The essay argued for managed coexistence with China, saying China is a "formidable competitor" but also "an essential US partner." So, containment is not tenable, it contended.

The essay pushed for managed coexistence in these words; "Advocates of neo-containment tend to see any call for managed coexistence as an argument for a version of the grand bargain; advocates of a grand bargain tend to see any suggestion of sustained competition as a case for a version of containment. That divide obscures a course between these extremes—one that is not premised on Chinese capitulation or on U.S.-Chinese condominium." According to it, "The need for cooperation between Washington and Beijing is far more acute, given the nature of contemporary challenges." But the key, it said, is for Washington to get "the balance between cooperation and competition right."

In essence, the essay implicitly sought a G2-style condominium defined by competitive-cum-cooperative elements, with the rest of the world having to adjust to it. By suggesting China's challenge and threat could no longer be addressed by the US alone, the essay, in addition to advocating the strengthening of US alliances, said that a US partnership with Beijing was indispensable.

The essay actually stood out for failing to look ahead. It listed four hot spots in the Indo-Pacific region but not the Himalayas, now the most dangerous flashpoint. In fact, it made no mention of India or the Quad or America's "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy or economic decoupling. If anything, the essay reflected the Kissingerian thinking still prevailing in some US policy circles.

A former Chinese vice foreign minister's call in a November 2020 *New York Times* op-ed for "cooperative competition" between the US and China sounded a lot like the "managed coexistence" idea proposed by Campbell and Sullivan in their essay, with both concepts implying a G2-style condominium. The ex-vice foreign minister, Fu Ying, wrote in her op-ed: "It is possible for the two countries to develop a relationship of 'coopetition' (cooperation + competition) by addressing each other's concerns."

The Trump administration defined the relationship with Beijing as pitting the US in deeply ideological, even existential, conflict with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). If Biden pursued US cooperation with China, it would help strengthen the CCP internally and externally.

Managed coexistence would allow China to manage the bilateral relationship largely on its terms, including protecting the CCP's primacy. When Fu called for "addressing each other's concerns" to build cooperative competition, she meant, as she herself

put it, that the "United States should be respectful of China's sense of national unity and avoid challenging China on the issue of Taiwan or by meddling in the territorial disputes of the South China Sea." Addressing each other's concerns also implies that the US must respect the fact, as Fu said, that China has a "different political system." China cannot, and will not, change because, without ultra-nationalism as the CCP's legitimating credo and without the Xi Jinping regime's aggressive expansionism, the country's political system would unravel.

Biden is unlike the four most recent US presidents: He has deep ties to the Washington establishment, including the lobbying industry, from his 44 years in the Senate and as vice president. No sooner had the media declared him the election winner than he named at least 40 current and former registered lobbyists to his transition team.

Biden, backed by Big Money, Big Tech and Big Media, was Wall Street's favoured candidate in the election. But, thanks to US corporate greed, Wall Street also remains China's powerful ally.

Furthermore, the national security team Biden has chosen isn't free of the Cold War thinking that sees Russia as the main foe. Such thinking plays into China's hands. Russia and China, as geographically proximate nations, have always been suspicious of each other's intentions as they compete for geopolitical influence. But US policy, including sanctions against Russia, have brought two natural strategic competitors into ever-closer alignment.

More fundamentally, an interventionist foreign policy under Biden on issues other than China will raise concerns over the renewed influence of the so-called US deep state, which is centred in security and intelligence agencies. Many Republicans believed the deep state worked hard to topple Trump from power. Former Attorney General Barr publicly identified one such rogue actor—the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). A "wilful if small" group at the FBI used the Russia-collusion claim to try and "topple an administration," Barr said in an interview in December.

A NEW INDO-PACIFIC POLICY

The imperative in the Indo-Pacific is to build a new strategic equilibrium pivoted on a stable balance of power. A constellation of likeminded countries linked by interlocking strategic cooperation has become critical to help build such equilibrium. The concept of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" was authored by the then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2016 and subsequently became the basis of America's Indo-Pacific strategy after Trump was elected president.

Biden has yet to clearly spell out his administration's approach to the Indo-Pacific. There are signs, though, that Biden may replace the "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy with a new policy. The Indo-Pacific strategy and China policy he adopts will be among his most-consequential foreign policy decisions. Biden's China and Indo-Pacific policies will have an important bearing on Indian (and Asian) security.

On China, Biden has shown a striking lack of strategic clarity thus far. After he launched his presidential campaign in 2019, Biden stunned many with his apparent strategic naïveté by declaring, "China is going to eat our lunch? Come on, man. I mean, you know, they're not bad folks, folks. But guess what? They're not competition for us." The strong blowback compelled Biden to backtrack and admit China was a threat.

In stark contrast, Trump repeatedly pledged during his successful presidential campaign in 2016 to fundamentally change the relationship with China. After assuming office, Trump quickly abandoned the approach of his predecessors, from Richard Nixon to Obama, that aided the rise of China, including as a trade leviathan. Jettisoning his predecessors' policy of "constructive engagement" with Beijing, Trump classified China as a "revisionist power," "strategic competitor" and principal adversary.

Trump's standing up to China explains why, unlike in Europe or the US, he has been popular in large parts of the Indo-Pacific, including in places as diverse as Japan, Australia, Taiwan, India, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Indonesia, Myanmar and South Korea. According to one analyst, many Asians "saw Trump as a coarse but powerful leader of the free world against [Chinese] communist tyranny." Even within China, Trump was admired by those concerned about President Xi Jinping's increasingly arbitrary and despotic rule.

However, by the time Trump came to office and engineered a paradigm shift in America's China policy, China had already emerged as his country's most formidable competitor and as a potent threat to its Asian neighbours.

Assisting China's rise was the "greatest" mistake of US foreign policy since the 1930s, according to Robert O'Brien, the last National Security Advisor under Trump. How did this blunder occur? "We closed our ears and our eyes. We believed what we wanted to believe," O'Brien candidly said last year.

That blunder "created a monster," as Trump admitted in 2019—a monster that will continue to haunt not only the US but also its allies and partners. Indeed, Asian countries, from Japan to India, are bearing the brunt of China's rise as an expansionist power that openly flouts international norms.

When Biden assumed office, the US was locked in a trade war, a technology war and a geopolitical war with China, with the strategic and ideological confrontation between the world's two largest economies beginning to reshape global geopolitics. In fact, by defining the CCP as the main threat to international peace and security and to the Chinese people's well-being, the Trump administration signalled its support for regime change in Beijing.

Of all the actions of the Trump administration, the one that stung Beijing the most was the unremitting US offensive against China as a predatory state controlled by the CCP without any political legitimacy or rule of law. This ideological onslaught implied that regime change was essential for China to abide by international norms and rules. The paradox is that Xi himself, as the *New York Times* reported, "sees China and the United States as locked in ideological rivalry. Since coming to power in 2012, he has called for Chinese schools, textbooks and websites to inocu-

GETTY IMAGES

Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the White House, February 14, 2012

BIDEN HAS CLAIMED THE US DOESN'T HAVE LEVERAGE AGAINST CHINA. IN REALITY, THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION HAS BEQUEATHED IMPORTANT LEVERAGE TO BIDEN TO DEAL WITH BEIJING FROM A POSITION OF STRENGTH

late youth against Western values that could erode party rule and the country's 'cultural self-confidence.'"

Meanwhile, US sanctions in the past year against CCP officials involved in the Hong Kong, Xinjiang and other crackdowns or in the South China Sea aggression have complicated Xi's task of holding his flock together. US sanctions and visa restrictions against CCP cadres and their family members threaten to create internal disarray in the party by jeopardising important members' interests, including their ability to keep money overseas and send their children to study in the West.

However, just when the Trump administration was on the cusp of forging an international democratic coalition against China, threatening the survival of Xi's regime, Trump lost the election. The election loss set in motion tumultuous and riotous developments in Washington that could undermine Trump's legacy.

UNCERTAIN DIRECTION UNDER BIDEN

Will Biden radically shift the Trump administration policy and treat China as a major competitor but not an implacable enemy, while also abandoning economic decoupling? Such a climbdown would mean a significant dilution of the US strategy to contain China, including reining in the relentless expansionism it pursues without regard to the diplomatic or geopolitical fallout.

Some close to the new US administration have fallaciously argued that China's significant geopolitical and economic clout cannot be rolled back and that the country is far too integrated in the global economy for economic decoupling to be successful. In fact, some key members of Biden's team believe that, instead of the US treating China as its primary adversary, Washington and Beijing should aim for shared leadership in the Indo-Pacific.

How will seeking shared leadership justify the united democratic front on China that Biden wishes to build? Can the US build a democratic coalition with the aim, not to contain China, but to employ major democracies' aggregate geopolitical and economic heft to establish a *modus vivendi* with Beijing?

It is critical issues like these that have injected a layer of uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific landscape following the leadership change in the White House. The big unknown is whether America's Indo-Pacific strategy and China policy will undergo structural shifts.

It is significant that, since Biden's victory in the US presidential election in November, China has displayed a distinctly cocky tone in its official statements. It has also put its propaganda machinery in overdrive. What explains this? The Chinese communist publication *Global Times* has offered an answer: "Biden is likely to abandon or at least adjust" Trump's "so-called Indo-Pacific strategy" and "fix ties with China."

Xi's regime, which presides over the world's largest, strongest and longest-surviving autocracy, clearly saw Biden's election win as a silver lining for China. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, reposing China's hope in Biden, said early this year that "a new window of hope is opening" and that the bilateral relationship with the US could now get back on the right track following a period of "unprecedented difficulty."

The pressure that the Trump administration ramped up on China has exacted a heavy toll on Beijing, denting its international image. Negative views of China reached historic highs in 2020.

Until Biden's election victory became clear, Beijing had sought to absorb the Trump administration's unceasing attacks by essentially ducking them. It sought the moral high ground by decrying Washington's return to the "zero-sum thinking of the Cold War era" and by claiming that it did not want to play into America's hands by responding in kind (as if it could). In essence, China's then posture implicitly conveyed that it could do little to deter the Trump administration's attacks and thus was putting up with them without seeking to provoke greater US punitive actions.

But once a Biden win became apparent, Beijing began aggressively lambasting the Trump administration's actions as extreme and crazy. More significantly, it started saying that, once the Biden administration took office, the US and China must come to terms with each other by opening dialogue. Seeking such a *modus vivendi* was also embedded in Xi's belated congratulatory letter to Biden.

The Trump administration's approach towards China, meanwhile, continues to be mischaracterised by many in the West as a "got-it-alone" approach. The truth is that the Trump administration ramped up pressure on China by resurrecting the Quad and giving it concrete shape. Trump may have weakened the trans-Atlantic alliance but, in the Indo-Pacific, his administration built the Quad into a promising coalition and upgraded security ties with key partners, including Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and Thailand. It also established new US defence cooperation with Vietnam and the Maldives.

Biden wants to build a coalition of democracies to exert pressure on China. But this is exactly what the Trump administration sought to do. The Quad is an alliance of leading democracies of the Indo-Pacific. The Trump administration committed to establishing a concert of democracies, with India serving as the western anchor and Japan and Australia the eastern and southern anchors of an Indo-Pacific balance of power. This led even distant powers like France, Germany and Britain to view a pluralistic, rules-based Indo-Pacific as central to international security and to unveil their own Indo-Pacific policies.

Important democracies today are looking to Biden to provide strategic clarity on his approach to the Indo-Pacific. Holding a large Summit for Democracy, as he plans to do to help "renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the free world," can scarcely offer such clarity. The summit would represent a values-based, globalised approach standing in sharp contrast to the Trump administration strategy of regionally leveraging cooperation with democracies for geopolitical ends.

Biden has claimed the US doesn't have leverage against China as yet. In reality, the Trump administration has bequeathed important leverage to the Biden team to capitalise on and deal with Beijing from a position of strength. However, if the Biden administration seeks to paint the Trump team's China legacy in unflattering light, it will undermine that leverage and embolden Beijing to demand the repudiation and rollback of Trump's actions. In fact, Xi's regime is hoping that Biden will return to the accommodationist approach of the Obama period, when China created artificial islands and militarised the South China Sea without inviting US sanctions or any other international costs.

In this light, how the Indo-Pacific and China policies develop under Biden will help shape regional security and the Quad's future. If Biden weakens America's Indo-Pacific and China policies, it will raise serious concerns across Asia. It will also lead to questions about the inherent unpredictability surrounding US strategy and the wisdom of investing in closer strategic bonds with Washington in the first place.

BIDEN IS LIKELY TO BE MORE INTERVENTIONIST THAN TRUMP. SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN SUPPORTED THE US INVASION OF IRAQ AND THE INTERVENTION IN LIBYA. AS HIS CRITICS POINT OUT, THERE ISN'T A WAR THAT BLINKEN HASN'T LOVED

Photos GETTY IMAGES

Biden has already signalled the likely replacement of the "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy. Absent in the 2020 Democratic Party Platform and Biden's campaign statements was any reference even to the widely used term "Indo-Pacific," as if the Democrats wished to return to the old name that China prefers: "Asia-Pacific". After his election, Biden started referring to the "Indo-Pacific" in calls with foreign leaders but not to a "free and open Indo-Pacific."

Instead, Biden coined a new phrase—"secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific." Also, in apparent deference to Beijing, the Biden office readout left out the assurance Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said he received from Biden during a congratulatory call that US security guarantees apply to Japan's administration of the disputed Senkaku Islands.

Just before demitting office as the US vice president, Mike Pence asked the incoming president to "stay the course" and "stand up to Chinese aggression and trade abuses." Pence called the "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy "essential to our prosperity, our security and the vitality of freedom in the world."

However, Biden thus far has given no indication how his "secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific" policy will be different from the "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy. A "secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific," which by definition doesn't exclude autocracies like China, would imply the abandonment of the "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy's goal of a rules-based and democracy-led order.

Furthermore, it is uncertain whether the Trump administration-initiated ideological offensive against the CCP as a threat to the Indo-Pacific and the wider world will survive under Biden. If it doesn't, the CCP's vicelike grip on China will endure, with its external aggression accelerating.

JAKE SULLIVAN, BIDEN'S NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR, SUPPORTED SUPPLYING ANTI-TANK MISSILES TO UKRAINE, WHICH PRESIDENT OBAMA OPPOSED. ON CHINA, HOWEVER, THE OTHERWISE HAWKISH SULLIVAN HAS BEEN AN ADVOCATE OF A CONCILIATORY APPROACH

WILL BIDEN CO-OPT INDIA?

Biden's Indo-Pacific policy approach will have an important bearing on Indian security and the direction of US-India strategic collaboration. China's aggressive expansionism has already driven a tectonic shift in India's security calculus, leading to closer defence and intelligence-sharing collaboration with the US and the signing of military logistics agreements last year with Japan and Australia.

The Trump administration helped midwife this tectonic shift by placing India at the centre of its Indo-Pacific strategy and seeking to forge a "soft alliance" with New Delhi. After establishing an Indo-Pacific strategy and resurrecting the Quad, which had been lying dormant for nine years, the Trump administration—in a symbolic nod towards India—renamed the US military's Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command.

Will Biden be able to build on that momentum in bilateral relations and formalise a soft alliance with New Delhi? The Chinese territorial aggression in the Himalayas has created a significant opening for Washington to bring India along.

China's aggression has compounded India's security challenges by turning the once-lightly-patrolled Himalayan frontier into a "hot" border. Beijing has also hung the threat of further military surprises, even as it deepens its strategic nexus with Pakistan to contain India. India henceforth will have to patrol the Himalayan frontier in a manpower-intensive way and raise additional mountain-warfare forces to help counter the growing Chinese threat.

Bolstering deterrence holds the key, as Indian forces cannot guard every nook and cranny of what is one of the world's most inhospitable and treacherous borders. India remains committed to strengthening strategic partnerships with key powers in the Indo-Pacific.

The Biden administration's co-option of India will be pivotal to building a constellation of democracies in the Indo-Pacific. After all, the other Quad members—the US, Japan and Australia—are already tied by bilateral and trilateral security alliances among themselves.

India's co-option, in fact, will ensure that the Quad becomes a de facto strategic alliance and starts playing a central role in a new multilateral security arrangement for the Indo-Pacific. That development, in turn, will serve as further evidence that the Xi regime's aggressive policies are starting to backfire.

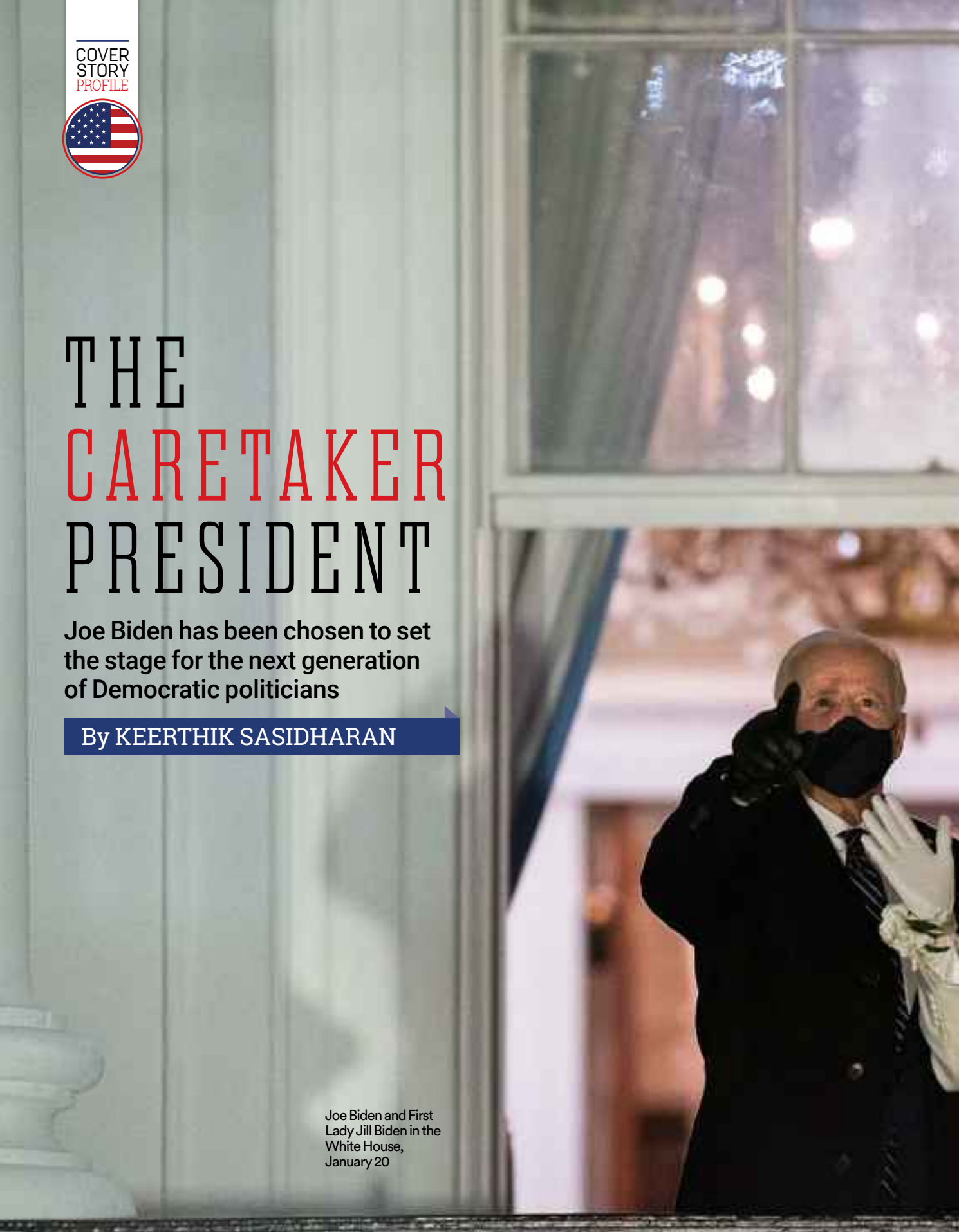
The momentum towards deeper US-India strategic collaboration, however, could perceptively slow if Biden's foreign policy downgrades India's importance in the Indo-Pacific strategy and returns to the Obama-era accommodationist approach towards China. If that happens, it would convince Indian policymakers to step up military modernisation so that India not only effectively counters Chinese threats and aggression but also starts imposing significant deterrent costs on Beijing. In any event, security across the Indo-Pacific, including US strategic interests, would benefit if India reinvented itself as a more secure and competitive nation.■

Brahma Chellaney is a geostrategist and the author of nine books, including, most recently, Water, Peace, and War

THE CARETAKER PRESIDENT

Joe Biden has been chosen to set the stage for the next generation of Democratic politicians

By KEERTHIK SASIDHARAN



Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden in the White House, January 20

'This is democracy's day. A day of history and hope of renewal and

This week, Joe Biden arrived on the stage of world history for a role that he had auditioned for throughout much of his adult life. He first appeared on the American political scene as a potential presidential candidate in 1987 when, for a brief while, he was deemed the bright young hope for the Democratic Party. But, before long, his campaign ended thanks to a plagiarism scandal. Two decades later, by 2008, he was a well-known figure in Washington DC, even if for the rest of America he was either a well-meaning but gaffe-prone political presence or one of those bland politicians whom you recognise on TV but somehow misremember their name. He was familiar but not famous. Despite being a seasoned politician of the Senate (a post he had held since 1972, since the age of 29), he was bested by a charismatic fellow Senator from Chicago, Barack Obama, who eventually offered him a job as his vice president. By 2016, he was seen as too old (he was 74 then); the other challenge, perhaps more insurmountable, was the seemingly foreordained presidency of Hillary Clinton. She brought with her a vast war chest of funding and donors coupled with an army of political operators and sympathetic media. Biden saw the writing on the wall and returned to private life as a grand eminence of American politics. He followed the well-worn tradition of giving speeches for a fee and occasionally appearing on national TV to reminisce about the Obama years just as former US President Donald Trump began to shred many norms of American politics.

By 2018, Biden began to present himself as an exasperated citizen who was aghast at the direction that Trump had begun to take America. To many, he was testing waters for a presidential bid, but the smart money was not on him. In fact, by the summer of 2019, Biden's putative campaign had sputtered to a near-stop. The finances had begun to run dry,

Photos **AP**

resolve through a crucible for the ages' JOE BIDEN US President, January 20

donors had vanished and the all-knowing cadre of cable TV experts dismissed him as a well-meaning but ultimately futile last stand of a political career that didn't know when to quit. The conventional wisdom was twofold after the Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada primaries for the Democratic ticket, all of which Biden lost: one of his rivals in the campaign (Pete Buttigieg, Kamala Harris, Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren) would go on to face Trump in the final presidential elections. The other was that Trump would most probably win. Sure, Trump was brutish and rough at the edges, they reasoned, but the stock market was booming, unemployment was low and tax cuts were popular with the Republicans.

It was in this context—one in which Biden had been written off amid Democratic primary candidates and the hold of Trump over American and Republican politics was seemingly permanent—that Joe Biden had his first primary win in South Carolina. This was thanks to his old allies such as veteran Congressman Jim Clyburn ("We know Joe. But more importantly, Joe knows us.") who told South Carolina's predominantly African-American voters to stick with Biden. And they did. Then followed the Super Tuesday primaries, when Democratic voters in 14 states cast their votes and of which Biden ended up winning 10. Suddenly, two things became clear. The long years of service in the Senate and later as vice president were seen as an asset in this electoral cycle, especially as Democrats recoiled from one assault after another that Trump inflicted on their political preferences. Biden began to appear as a candidate who would return America to regular programming rather than use the bully pulpit of the presidency to play carnival barker on Twitter. The other, and perhaps more important aspect, was that the entire Obama-era electoral machine—a ferociously efficient campaign team—began to coalesce around Biden. It is a testament to Biden's talent for the underappreciated art of management that during the past two years there have been no leaks, infighting in public view or mismanagement of resources from his campaign. The result was a steady accretion of perception of stability which was in direct contrast with Trump, who rejoiced in playing a bull in search of many china shops to enter.

By the summer of 2020, there arrived two great sources of turmoil. One of them was the endemic problem of police brutality—neither new nor unforeseen but tragically a feature, rather a bug, of the American political economy—which provoked violent protests that quickly turned into riots across American cities. The other was an exogenous shock—a retrovirus from China, via Europe, that got on a plane and arrived on American shores. The monumentally catastrophic response of the Trump administration that followed—from simple messaging regarding wearing masks, which was turned into a partisan issue, to the stunning failure seen last week, when governors across America realised that the federal government had failed to acquire and provision for enough vaccines—set the stage for millions to be infected by the Covid-19 virus and hundreds of thousands of deaths. Unemployment and permanent closures of many businesses followed. Suddenly, for the great middle-class of America that lives in the no man's land between Democrat and Republican identities, one fact became blindingly obvious: leadership matters and leaders matter.

The challenges facing Biden are neither new—with the exception of the urgent need to address Covid with seriousness and resources—nor unknown to many in his cabinet. From an equally belligerent and strategically minded China to mending relations with the European Union, from returning to multilateral organisations to identifying what can be done to salvage the Iranian nuclear deal, Biden's foreign policy programme will involve some form of return to the normal, albeit in a much diminished form of American commitments. It is domestically that Biden faces his greatest challenges. From race relations to economic inequality, from a potentially explosive rise in white nationalism that can metastasise into a homegrown insurgency to efficiently regulating America's behemoth 21st century industries with 19th century laws, from imminent questions about new waves of Central American refugees to an urgent need for immigration reform, the problems that stare Biden on Day One speak to the amount of work that needs to be done to merely return to a semblance of normalcy.

All of this raises a question: what are we to make of Biden himself? He is an old school politician—one who is happier shaking hands and kissing babies rather than wading through the minutiae of policy. This may very well be to his advantage given the polarised nature of how reality is described by the American political elite. It is likely that many of his own supporters on the left may end up discovering that Biden is more centrist than they would like and many of his critics on the right will realise he is more radical than they had hoped for. Like an old fox, which he is, Biden will have to summon his life's hardwon political skills to appear as many things to many people leading them to do what they have always done—underestimate him. Irrespective, one can't shake the feeling that while this is a caretaker presidency, he has been summoned by history to perform the difficult act of course correction and set the stage for the next generation of Democratic politicians who will have to govern a country that will be less white and more unequal as the global climate crisis worsens. If Biden does manage to revive America, the irony may very well be that he will be forgotten once America returns to prosperity and health. Instead, if he fails, he will be remembered as the first in the long line of unsuccessful presidents who followed in the wake of the incendiary Trump years and who failed to stem the decline of American power. It is safe to say that Biden—after a lifetime of public service, during which he often laboured alone, tending to the weeds and flowers of retail politics—will happily choose to be forgotten. But in that self-effacement lies Biden's great ambition which has hid itself in plain sight, which is often unseen due to the form it appears in: a plain-speaking decency. ■

Keerthik Sasidharan lives in New York City. He is the author of The Dharma Forest

CHOOSE HOW YOU WANT TO EXPERIENCE OPEN MAGAZINE

Upto
65% OFF
on (Print+Digital) Subscription
+
Attractive gifts

Period	No of Issues	Cover Price	Offer Price	Your Free Gift
2 year	102+102 (Print+Digital)	₹7,650	₹2,650	Swiss Military multifunctional desk lamp or Swiss Military touch lamp with speaker worth ₹2190
1 Year	51+51 (Print+Digital)	₹3,825	₹1,450	Swiss Military toiletries bag or Swiss Military wallet worth ₹990

FREE With 2 year subscription

Multifunctional Desk lamp

Features:

- 360° Rotatable neck
- Supports built-in microphone and hands-free function
- Play Mp3/ WMA, WAV audio formats
- Micro USB charging port
- Supports USB drive playback

Worth ₹1,890

Or

Touch Lamp with speaker

Features:

- Bluetooth speaker with touch-controlled LED light
- Wirelessly listen to and control music
- Portable desk light
- 6 Colour dancing lights
- Provides up to 3 hours of playback

Worth ₹2,190

SWISS® MILITARY

FREE With 1 year subscription

Toiletries bag

Features:

- Water resistant
- Multiple pockets for storage convenience
- Material: Rhombus pattern polyester

Worth ₹990

Or

Wallet

Features:

- PU leather
- Total 16 pockets for card storage, ID card, paper currency etc.
- DIMENSION: L:11.5 x W: 9 (In cms)

Worth ₹990

TO SUBSCRIBE: WhatsApp 'openmag' to 9999800012 Toll free no. 1800 102 7510

Visit www.openthemagazine.com/subscribe ₹ Enclose your Cheque/DD favouring Open Media Network Private Limited

Open Media Network Private Limited,

4, DDA Commercial Complex, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110017, Phone: 011-48500500, Email: customercare@openmedianetwork.in

* For terms and conditions, visit http://www.openthemagazine.com

MADAM VEEP

Kamala Harris is fierce, confident, a role model for women of colour and a trailblazer who hasn't stopped blazing

By KAVEREE BAMZAI

Kamala Harris being sworn in as vice president at the US Capitol in Washington, January 20

Photos **GETTY IMAGES**

It was the early '60s. John F Kennedy had been assassinated, the Vietnam War was becoming deadly serious and Americans were losing lives defending a corrupt regime. Student anger was boiling over, nowhere more so than at the University of California at Berkeley. Meghnad Desai, then a researcher, remembers befriending a bright young economist from then British Jamaica, Donald Harris, and his equally sharp and fiery wife Shyamala Gopalan. He recalls little Kamala Devi and her sister Maya Lakshmi. "They were being raised to be Black girls," he says.

Aretha Franklin playing on the gramophone; Sunday Mass at the African American 23rd Avenue Church of God in Oakland; the historically Black Howard University, Washington DC, for graduation. There is little to suggest Kamala Devi Harris' Indian heritage other than her great and often expressed regard for mother Shyamala, who came to Berkeley as a 19-year-old from Chennai to study nutrition and endocrinology. She would go on to work on progesterone receptogene stimulating advances in breast cancer research.

Filmmaker Mira Nair says Harris could well be the cinematic child of Demetrius and Mina in *Mississippi Masala*, a romantic drama she directed in 1991. Denzel Washington played Demetrius, a young Black man who's never been out of Mississippi, and Sarita Choudhury was Mina, an Indian via Nairobi and London, who'd never been to India, but is raised as one. Mina calls herself mixed masala, but it's not the identity her mother chose for Harris. Shyamala kept her daughters connected through regular visits back home but there was no question in her mind that they were Black, much as Barack Obama, the son of a Kenyan father and white American mother, chose to be identified as Black.

Perhaps it was the era of civil rights with its focus on Black consciousness that inspired Shyamala, or the belief that a confused sense of heritage would be a disadvantage. Though her parents divorced when she was seven and Donald Harris went on to become professor emeritus of economics at Stanford, Harris has embraced her structured African Americanness, making it part of her legal practice and political career. Her appointment as vice president of the US has been hailed as a milestone for Indian/South Asian Americans, African Americans, and women of colour generally. But this cannot be just about identity, says UC Davis Professor Sunaina Maira. For example, her record as attorney general in California is marked by controversy that she did not use her power as "top cop" prosecutor to investigate police misconduct enough, at a time when outrage over police killings of Black and brown Americans has been rising.

Ultimately, says Maira, as America witnessed during the Obama years, it is not just racial background that guarantees policies based on racial justice. "It is not enough to occupy seats of power as an Indian/Black woman but to wield that power against entrenched systems of oppression. So it remains to be seen what Harris will actually bring to a centrist Democratic leadership under Joe Biden," adds Maira.

That in itself has been a matter of controversy with some conspiracy theorists among the Republicans suggesting that she, with her supposed radical, left-wing agenda, will hijack the presidency. Biden has positioned himself as a transition candidate, further fuelling this point of view. Biden sees himself as a bridge to a new generation of leaders not merely in his administration but a more multicultural and diverse America, which is less white, less Protestant and less defined by organised religion.

Harris embodies much of this change. Though her mother was Hindu, Harris was a regular churchgoer, even singing in the choir with her sister. She identifies herself as Baptist and is a member of the Third Baptist Church of San Francisco. She has been married, since 2014, to Los Angeles attorney Douglas Emhoff, a Jewish man from Brooklyn. Her ascendancy marks many firsts for many political minorities in America: women, African Americans and Asian Americans. It is not something that gives diasporic Indians unalloyed joy. As author Gyan Prakash has noted, her half-Blackness prevents them from claiming her as their own, especially when it comes to her left-of-centre politics. They would rather rally behind Nikki Haley, former South Carolina governor, even if she converted to Christianity from Sikhism.

> 'Today we marked the swearing
> to national office: Vice President

Before creating history as the first woman vice president, Harris was the junior Senator from California and even before that, the state's attorney general. She has consistently put her weight behind progressive legislation, whether it was creating a Hate Crimes Unit focussed on schools when she was district attorney, San Francisco, or initiating the Mortgage Fraud Strike Force to battle the 2010 foreclosure crisis as attorney general of California. That was the time she became close to Beau, Joe Biden's son, who was then attorney general of Delaware, and died tragically of brain cancer in 2015. In her autobiography, *The Truths We Hold: An American Journey*, Harris has written how Beau stood by her at a time of incredible pressure from banks. It was the foundation of a firm, though sadly short, friendship.

Harris is used to being the most powerful woman in the room and has no discomfort with that culturally or socially. As she once told students at Howard University: "You can do anything and you can do everything." It is this confidence that made her bid for the Democratic presidential nominee after a mere two years

Kamala Harris and Joe Biden at the inauguration of the Biden presidency, January 20

in of the first woman in American history elected Kamala Harris. Don't tell me things can't change.'

JOE BIDEN, US President, January 20

in the Senate, the highlight of which was her firm but sardonic questioning of Brett Kavanaugh during the Supreme Court confirmation hearings. She has been loud and clear in calling out sexism during Senate hearings, and has piloted or worked on legislation ranging from making lynching a hate crime to a workplace harassment bill.

America has historically been uncomfortable with women in positions of power. Since 1776, there have been only two female vice presidential hopefuls, Geraldine Ferraro and Sarah Palin, and merely one presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton—and one enormously funny fictional *Veep*, Selina Meyer, played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus. No surprises then that there has been much scrambling to find the most appropriate term for husband Doug Emhoff (second gentleman) and curiosity about a man happy to be addressed as Mr Kamala Harris. She is stepmother to his two children and is delighted to be addressed by them as 'Momala'.

The Trump era has been replete with misogyny, led by a president who has only a nodding acquaintance with contemporary engagement with modern women. Already the House of Representatives has 27 new Congresswomen this year, bringing the total number of women serving to a record 118. This extension of the Pantsuit Nation (the private Facebook group and Twitter hashtag used to rally Clinton during her 2016 presidential campaign) is represented by women of fierce beliefs and uncompromising opinions, such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar. In a world where you cannot be what you cannot see, such numbers are empowering.

So far, even when her stand on issues such as death penalty and life imprisonment with parole has been questioned, she has been unflinching under the pressure of scrutiny. Now that she is a heartbeat away from the presidency, that will amplify. Everything she does, says or even wears, will be up for discussion. She got a quick taste of it recently when she shot for the cover of *Vogue*, which used a casual photo of hers dressed in a casual pant suit and her favourite Chuck Taylor Converse sneakers. There was elation too when she wore her trademark Alpha Kappa Alpha pearls at the inauguration marking her pride in being part of the country's first African American sorority.

Harris is a complex mix of races, religions and identities. From being part of the second class to integrate Berkeley's classrooms when she began school in 1969, to living through her parents' bitter divorce, to not being allowed to play with predominantly white children when she and Maya went to visit her father in Palo Alto, to walking on the Marina Beach in Chennai with her grandfather, she carries with her every slight, every victory, every pain, every joy.

Harris has promised to work towards unifying America with the 3.00AM agenda. It's the idea that all Americans are kept awake at night by one thing: How can I get a job, keep a job, pay the bills by the end of the month, ensure my children have a decent education and an opportunity to succeed, especially during Covid? How can I buy a home and keep my home?

Nothing else matters, certainly not whether Kamala Devi Harris is more brown, or more Black. Just that, as she told Indian-American actress Mindy Kaling on their dosa-cooking video, not to call her aunty. ■

COVER STORY
ESSAY

THE DREAM WOR

The myth of the indispensable nation

Donald Trump and Melania Trump leaving the White House, January 20

K OF AMERICA

AP

By VINAY LAL

A **'date which will live in** infamy': such were the words used by Franklin D Roosevelt to characterise the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941 and similarly invoked by Chuck Schumer, minority leader in the US Senate, on January 6th this year when Donald Trump's overwhelmingly white storm-troopers descended upon the US Capitol with the declared intent to safeguard the Republic—many more would say to sow terror and confusion—and 'stop the steal'. The presidency of Donald J Trump had come down to this: what had begun at his inaugural address as a promise that the 'carnage' would end with his ascendancy to the White House was now, after four years of bitter acrimony, a ruthless disregard for all norms of truth and civility, and a veritable call to arms to bring liberals and alleged 'radicals' to heel, being bookended with carnage in the 'citadel of democracy' as a violent mob swept through the US Capitol, vandalising offices, assaulting police officials, creating mayhem, smearing walls with excrement—and leaving behind five dead.

What transpired at the US Capitol has seemed utterly inconceivable to many around the world who, even as the US appeared as a bully on the world stage or faltered every now and then, thought of the country as 'the shining city on the hill'. It was then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright who in 1998 first described the US as 'the indispensable nation', words that would be parroted by Barack Obama in 2012 when, in addressing 1,000 graduates of the US Air Force Academy, he

gallantly announced that he saw in front of him "an American century because no other nation seeks the role that we play in global affairs, and no other nation can play the role that we play in global affairs". Whatever the arrogance of such a view, Obama almost certainly thought it within his rights to think thus: when he was elected for his first term in 2008, his triumph was celebrated in many countries as though he had been elected the president of their country. The people who behaved and thought such were echoing only the reality that was palpably present to them: the US does often decide the fate of nations. After all, people should at the very least be permitted to choose whether they would like their country blown to bits by a rabid Republican, an old-fashioned conservative, a liberal Democrat or—though the world was spared this spectacle the last four years—a vengeful president.

There is, it must be admitted, nothing quite like the idea of America in modern world history. No country has so thoroughly monopolised the world's imagination. When America cries, the world starts shedding tears; when it exults, it expects the rest of the world to follow suit. And often the world willingly obliges. *Le Monde*, the newspaper of the French intelligentsia and establishment, was practically beside itself with grief when, a little short of 20 years ago, the Twin Towers were brought down. 'We Are All Americans', it unabashedly screamed in a headline the day following the attacks, though France otherwise is a country that affects a haughty superiority when it comes to art, literature, language, wine, perfumes, lingerie and the infernal baguette. No one doubts that there would have been no such proclamation of solidarity—what in the characteristically anodyne, indeed insipid, language perfected by Americans is summarised in the phrase 'thoughts and prayers'—if the Twin Towers had been brought down in Bogota, Islamabad, Nairobi or New Delhi. When the misogynists and serial sexual assaulters in the US found their match in women who launched the MeToo movement, suddenly every country had its MeToo awakening; when Black Lives Matter (BLM) created minor tremors in the US, a country into whose genetic code racism is all but inscribed, every country started having its own variant of BLM—even though racism in the US, whatever the forms it may take elsewhere, is a malady that, as James Baldwin would have said, began and can only end in the minds of white people. The world waits and watches for cues to come from the US—the indispensable nation, after all.

> THERE IS NOTHING QUITE LIKE THE IDEA OF AMERICA IN MODERN WORLD HISTORY. NO COUNTRY HAS SO THOROUGHLY MONOPOLISED THE WORLD'S IMAGINATION

No country has ever been so spectacularly successful in the course of history as the US in making its own self-representation the template by which everyone else judges it. It is not entirely coincidental that it is in the US that advertising, even if Thomas J Barratt in the late 19th century wrought a revolution in London with his slogans seeking to bring Pears soap into every British household, was first established as a profession. But America was beginning to sell itself to the world long before Madison Avenue would become the byword for the cut-throat advertising agency. The fiction that America was a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate on which the white European had but to write his name, was intrinsic to the story of the 'settlement' of the land by the Pilgrims and later the Puritans. These English settlers were beholden to the notion that America is divinely favoured and they saw themselves as carrying out, in the phrase of the Harvard intellectual historian Perry Miller, an 'errand into the wilderness'. Intent on carving out a sacred geography from what they largely conceived as emptiness, the European settlers gave no thought to the consideration that, in native American cosmologies, every stone, tree, mountain and body of water is imbued with sacred meaning. They were firmly persuaded that in the settlement of America by European Christians lay the fulfilment of sacred history: here, in America, which encompassed 'the ends of the earth', prophecy would itself come to an end. The groundwork had been laid some decades before the first permanent English settlement came into being in Jamestown in 1607: one writer, opining in a tract published in 1577, reasoned that 'these Christians have discovered these countries and people, which so long have been unknown, and they not us: which plainly may argue, that it is God's good will and pleasure, they should be instructed in his divine service and religion, which from the beginning have been nuzzled and nourished in atheism, gross ignorance and barbarous behavior'.

The arguments are instructive, pointing as they do to what would culminate over the decades and centuries in what is called 'the American way of life'. The indigenous people and their lands were waiting to be 'discovered' and thus become 'fulfilled'. The Europeans 'discovered' the Indians, 'and they not us': clear grounds for a hierarchy—one ordained by 'God's good will'. It is the further 'pleasure' of God that they, the savages mired in atheism, gross ignorance and ignoble customs, should be 'instructed in his divine service and religion'. Yet the exceptionality of the European settlers still lay elsewhere, as the English theologian John Cotton, who would in time minister to the Puritans at the Massachusetts Bay Colony, made clear. He explained in 1630 that 'other peoples have their land by providence; we have it by promise'. Thus the settlement of America by white Christians was no

GETTY IMAGES

Pro-Trump protestors in the US Senate Chamber, January 6

accident of history, even far more so than the design of history; it was the redemption of God's promise to plant the seed of the white man on alien and purportedly barren land that was just there for the taking. Where the utopias previously envisioned by European thinkers looked to the past, here Christ's kingdom on earth took on an entirely new meaning since, as it was imagined, neither history nor tradition encumbered the Puritans as they sought individual and corporate spiritual and material uplift. From the multiple perspectives of geography, time and history, the literary critic Sacvan Bercovitch has remarked, 'America was '*pulcherrima inter mulieres*, the youngest and loveliest of Christ's brides,' the last, best hope of mankind, whether mankind knew it or not.'

It is only a minor point of difference that Lincoln was perhaps referring more to the democratic form of government rather than to the US as such when, in the midst of the Civil War, he beseeched Americans to recognise their country as 'a light unto the world, the last great hope for humankind'. He was playing with the similarly ambiguous language broached by Thomas Jefferson in his First Inaugural Address (1801) when he implored those of his countrymen who feared that 'a republican government cannot be strong' to consider whether they would be justified in abandoning a government that had kept them free from the thraldom of theocracy and was doubtless 'the world's best hope'. The form of government in America, Jefferson would say, 'is the only one where every man, at the call of the law, would fly to the standard of the law, and would meet invasions of the public order as his own personal concern'. It is these idealised expressions that have led to much ink being spilled on America's Founding Fathers and the apparent nobility of purpose with which they were guided to steer their fellow colonists to chart a course independent of the British sovereign and create their own history. This history has

been captured in the phrase, 'no taxation without representation', though of course most of the world and nearly all of America would love no taxation—with or without representation. As Marx would have it, to paraphrase but lightly from his essay on the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, those who do not represent themselves will have representation thrust upon them.

To read the American Founding Fathers is to come away with the impression that the white colonists singularly bore the brunt of English oppression. There is nary a hint in all the sermonising that is on witness when 'the American people' are addressed by their president and God is called upon to shower blessings upon America that 'America' excludes as much as it includes—and that the epic 'story of American freedom' as charted by thousands of sometimes well-meaning Americans over three centuries is handily eclipsed by the story of American unfreedom. Indeed, the very extermination of the native Americans and the subjection of Black people to a draconian and barbarous regime of slavery were viewed by the colonists as taking place at the will of God. 'I am very clear in my opinion,' George Washington was writing on September 7th, 1783, 'that policy and economy point very strongly to the expediency of being upon good terms with the Indians, and the propriety of purchasing their lands in preference to attempting to drive them by force of arms out of their Country; which... is like driving the wild Beasts of ye forest... when the gradual extension of our settlements will as certainly cause the savage, as the wolf, to retire; both being beasts of prey, though they differ in shape.' War is inherent in the condition of the 'savage': this is implicit in Washington's seemingly generous attempt to lay out a policy of dealing with native Americans, an insight that would cannibalise the impulse of a generation of Jeffersonians to root out Indians and tear them apart from their culture. The fate of the people of African origins could be surmised from the slave markets where they were treated as no different from chattel; it would be sealed by the document that marked the birth of the Republic. The Constitution of the US, a document that has often been described as a miraculous example of human ingenuity and the ultimate expression of the aspiration of a free people to govern themselves, and which on January 6th this year was being bandied around during the Senate debate over the certification of Joe Biden's victory by Democrats and Republicans alike as 'the greatest document of freedom' in the world, permitted states to count three-fifths of their slave populations to determine their representation in the House of Representatives and the Electoral College.

In plain English, the Founding Fathers agreed, a slave was only three-fifths a human being; nor is there any evidence to suggest that this munificent bestowal of dignity to the slave provoked outrage among lovers of freedom. Two decades later, across the Atlantic in the French colony known as St Domingue, staging what is the greatest revolution that has been seen in the Americas, Black slaves revolted and under Toussaint L'Ouverture created the first free Black republic in the world. The idea that Black people might aspire to be free was, as the late Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot so eloquently argued in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), all but unthinkable to the great European philosophes and chatterboxes. They puzzled over why Black people, whom they conceived as naturally in love with their own serfdom, should be at all agitated by the thought of freedom. Jefferson, who was delirious with joy at the overthrow of monarchy or what Edmund Burke memorably called the 'cashiering of kings' in France, took a contrary view of the Haitian Revolution: slaves in revolt were nothing but a mob, at worst a beast unleashed upon the innocents, and moreover they might instigate slaves in America to revolt. He refused to recognise Haitian independence. It wasn't until 1825 that France acknowledged Haitian independence, though not without exacting punitive reparations that, with the accumulation of interest, would not be paid until 1947; meanwhile, the US, the 'last best hope of earth', and this from Lincoln's 1862 message to Congress, did not recognise

GETTY IMAGES

Martin Luther King Jr at the March on Washington, August 1963

Haiti as a sovereign independent nation until the same year. The 'Great Emancipator' had at long last been shamed—at a time when the notion of 'shame' was part of a common and shared vocabulary of emotions and had not been, as is the case today, virtually obliterated from the pharmacopeia of remedies with which good can be effected—into acting with the thought that he could not in good faith seek to liberate one group of slaves while failing to recognise the hardwon freedoms of another group of slaves.

> THE VERY EXTERMINATION OF THE NATIVE AMERICANS AND THE SUBJECTION OF BLACK PEOPLE TO A DRACONIAN AND BARBAROUS REGIME OF SLAVERY WERE VIEWED BY THE COLONISTS AS TAKING PLACE AT THE WILL OF GOD

Even as genocide and slavery spilled out from the pores and arteries of American society, Americans persisted in the widespread belief, as the sociologist Robert Bellah noted, that God is 'actively interested and involved in history, with a special concern for America'. What has emerged from this is a discourse that scholars and commentators characterise as 'American exceptionalism'. We may require, however, a more nuanced and discerning language to understand *the anomalous state of America in world history since even in its despotism it appears to radiate light over the rest of the world.* Such a view cannot be remotely captured in the benign not to mention pubescent enthusiasm with which Francis Fukuyama, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, celebrated 'the end of history'. As if one article in *National Interest* (1989) was not enough to expound on an embarrassingly trite idea, he followed it up with a book, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), the thesis of which was merely that with the demise of communism and the break-up of the Soviet Bloc the 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution' had been achieved and Western liberal democracy could be viewed as the 'final form of human government' just as the market economy could be construed as the perfect arena for the fulfilment of human desires. Fukuyama should have recognised his true calling as the hatchet man for retailers: shop till you drop dead!

What Fukuyama did not divine is the dream work at which America excels. No empire ever colonised as thoroughly as has America; none has done so with as much conviction in its own innocence and with such unctuous arrogance as to believe that, whatever the deeds of America, to quote from a speech given by President George HW Bush in January 1992, "the world trusts us with power, and the world is right". To see the dream work of America in play, it is enough to consider the unfailing gratitude with which many immigrants speak so warmly of the multiple freedoms of mobility, opportunity and expression that they have encountered in the land of plenty. It will not be enough to ask whether these immigrants are acquainted with, or care to know, the history of the holocaust perpetrated upon native Americans, the Indian wars, the slave trade, plantation slavery, the countless wars in which the US has been engaged, the Asian exclusion laws and the similarly endless list of atrocities that have been catalogued by Noam Chomsky, William Appleman Williams, Howard Zinn, William Blum, Chalmers Johnson and many others. Indeed, this argument will not do at all: the fact that they have been catalogued, and can be discussed, is at once trumpeted as an instantiation of American democracy. What is more arresting, apropos of immigrants, is that those who come from countries that have been bombed, bullied, terrorised or constantly been put under the muzzle of the gun are precisely those who declare their fidelity to the American flag, the culture of guns, and the laissez-faire and radically conservative policies of extremist Republicans. It is no accident that, in the recently concluded election of 2020, the Vietnamese-Americans, Cuban-Americans and Iranian-Americans were among those immigrant communities who most warmed up to Trump and the Republican Party. First bomb them, then get their votes. This, too, is part of the dream work of America.

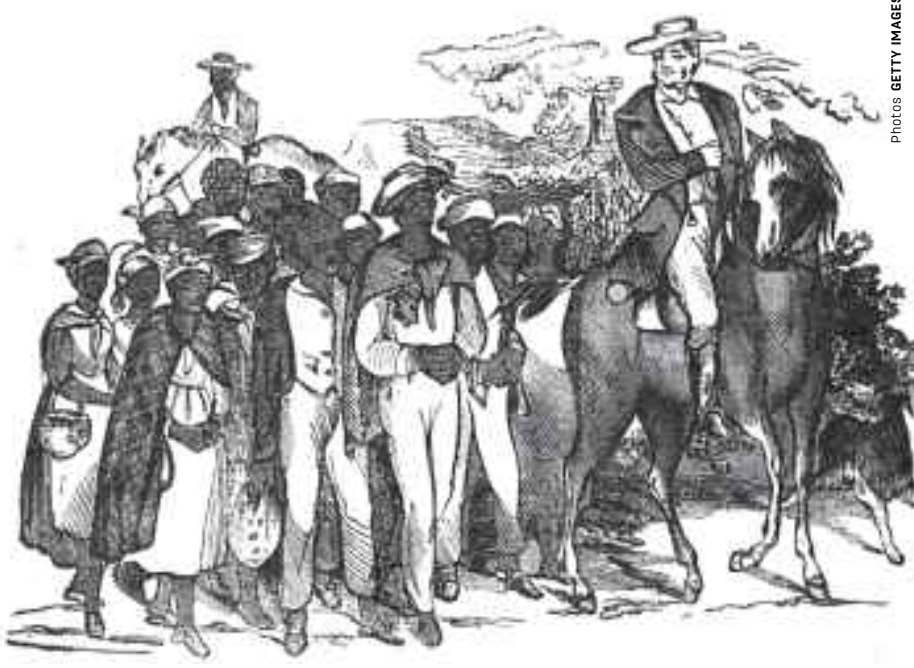
The dream work of America, the modes by which it proceeds, are at once more subtle and insidious. The now somewhat forgotten historian of the American South, David M Potter, was much closer to an understanding of this dream work. As he argued in *The People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*, a set of lectures he wrote in 1950, America did indeed have a 'revolutionary message to offer but we have been mistaken in our concept of what that message was. We supposed that our revelation was 'democracy revolutionizing the world,' but in reality it was 'abundance revolutionizing the world'—a message which we did not preach and scarcely understood ourselves, but one which was peculiarly able to preach its own gospel without words'. Perhaps, growing up in India as a teenager, I sensed how the gospel of America insinuated itself into the very fabric of our being. It was the early mid-1970s: India had signed a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union, and at the school in Delhi which I attended, Springdales, visitors from the Soviet Union frequently showed up at the morning assembly. But even in my middle-class milieu of west Delhi, far from the more anglicised parts of south Delhi which seemed rather elite, Anglo-American culture absolutely predominated. The late afternoons and

holidays were given over to pop music and rock and roll; the comic books of Dennis the Menace and Archie; steamy American novels with blondes, Cadillacs, and martinis;news reports on the boxing matches of Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier and George Foreman; and scrutinising the ads for a 'Bullworker'. No sooner did an American picture get released at the movie hall Chanakya, sometimes a few years after it had already had a run in the US, we made a dash for it—even though we got the worst lot of Hollywood, from the lachrymose *Love Story* to lighter and altogether B-grade comedy-drama flicks such as *Butterflies Are Free*. It was the same story in Indonesia, where I spent two years in the early 1970s. It is in this devoutly Islamic country that I gorged on television re-runs of *I Love Lucy* and *I Dream of Jeannie*—and, most importantly, *Bonanza*: big sky country, wide expanse, miles and miles of ponderosas, a land of abundance colonising my dreams. That was the story in much of the world and certainly in what these days is called the Global South.

Yet, if at all America ever was an 'indispensable nation', it was so only for a short period of time—substantially shorter, in any case, than the period during which the Union Jack held sway over seaand land. A country which has bequeathed to the world the notion that everything is disposable has finally shown itself to be—well, dispensable if not disposable. A few people groaned and fewer still expressed umbrage when President Trump unabashedly dismissed African nations, Haiti and El Salvador as 'shithole countries', but, truth be told, the vast majority of Americans did not care. There was no national uproar, not even the pipsqueak of a collective response, much less a demonstration against this outrageous insult, from Black Lives Matter. African countries are apparently good enough only to be dumping grounds, as Lawrence Summers made it all too clear in a memo he wrote during his stint as chief economist at the World Bank. Sub-Saharan Africa could be more readily integrated into the world economy, Summers gave it as his expert opinion in a leaked memo, if it could be persuaded to surrender its untapped reservoirs of mineral wealth in exchange for toxic wastes, asbestos, leaded gasoline and other pollutants. 'I have always thought that underpopulated countries in Africa are vastly underpolluted,' Summers wrote before elaborating: 'Their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low in pollutants compared to Los Angeles or Mexico.' This is Summers' idea of a 'fair exchange' facilitated by the free market; it is nothing more than theft and sanctifying the noxious idea that non-Europeans do not know how to make efficient use of their land and resources. Summers would later seek to exonerate himself with the remark that he was only being sarcastic, not a far cry from the rather more infamous observation by Trump that he had only engaged in 'locker-room talk' when he was discovered to have said that powerful men like him could grab women by their genitals and get away with it. Both Trump and Summers knew what they were talking about and what was altogether permissible in a country that thrives on pillage and plunder: the New York real estate swindler would go on to win the presidency, not before characterising Mexicans as 'rapists'; Summers, in turn, would go on to serve as a high-level functionary in the Treasury Department before becoming its secretary, later assuming the presidency of Harvard, where he had to be coaxed into resigning after impugning the intelligence of women, before finding yet another stint of life under the allegedly enlightened Obama—as director of his National Economic Council. If you are white and privileged, you can certainly count on getting a second chance in life—and more. This, too, is America—the land of the free and the brave.

THE US, THE 'LAST BEST HOPE OF EARTH', AND THIS FROM ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S 1862 MESSAGE TO CONGRESS, DID NOT RECOGNISE HAITI, THE WORLD'S FIRST FREE BLACK REPUBLIC CREATED AT THE TURN OF 19TH CENTURY, AS A SOVEREIGN INDEPENDENT NATION UNTIL THE SAME YEAR

No one imagines that the US will be eviscerated from the global cultural imaginary so easily, though Britain's slide into second-class status and even dementia should sound a cautionary note to the US. Apart from the self-flagellation called Brexit and the mindnumbing antics of the various mediocrities who constitute the royal family, Britain is today the conversation for those interested in lovely heritage homes or the 'wholesome' entertainment for 'the family' for which the BBC is still known and admired. The Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine may jog the memory of those whose gaze has so resolutely been set upon the Ivy League universities, Stanford, MIT and



Photos GETTY IMAGES

A group of slaves being driven to a slave market in the American South, 1851

IN PLAIN ENGLISH, THE FOUNDING FATHERS AGREED, A SLAVE WAS ONLY THREE-FIFTHS A HUMAN BEING; THERE IS NO EVIDENCE TO SUGGEST THAT THIS MUNIFICENT BESTOWAL OF DIGNITY TO THE SLAVE PROVOKED OUTRAGE AMONG LOVERS OF FREEDOM

other American educational behemoths that they have forgotten that Britain is not devoid of institutions of higher learning. 'I couldn't help but notice that, when the subject of college came up in any Korean context,' wrote Colin Marshall for the *Los Angeles Review of Books Blog* on December 26th, 2015 of his time in Korea, 'it was only a matter of time before someone mentioned Harvard'. For some Korean students, barring Harvard there is nothing else beyond their own shores. When there is talk of sending their children abroad for higher education, Indian middle-class parents can think of nothing else except the US—and Australia, Canada and Britain only appear on their horizon when, for one reason or another, the US is out of reach. Those who arrive in the lesser settler colonies, the country cousins of the great power, console themselves with the thought that they are experiencing America vicariously and may yet in time gravitate to its shores.

Not only has the US made deep inroads into so many domains of life, wielding the stick of cultural imperialism that the American political scientist, and yet another Harvard professor, Joseph S Nye, banalised as 'soft power', but it has indubitably gifted the world much in the realm of literature, music and genuinely interesting thought. The immensely creative intelligence of its New England Brahmins, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau; the swashbuckling poet Walt Whitman and, a century later, the song writer and balladeer Bob Dylan; the legion of dazzling blues and jazz musicians who, as Homer would have said, turned the woes and sorrows of their people into poetry; or the extraordinary galaxy of African American writers, musicians, dissenters and political thinkers from the 1930s to the 1960s, among them Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Paul Robeson, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Claude McKay, Marian Anderson, Nina Simone, Malcolm X, Bayard Rustin, Fannie Lou Hamer and Rev Martin Luther King: all of this and more is the gift of America to the world. I myself have been shaped by this effulgent splash of brilliance and ethical striving in the midst of so much darkness.

When all is said and done, there is still the noose. *The Times of India* captured what transpired at the US Capitol with a headline read around the world: 'COUP KLUX KLAN'. The events of that day require no dissection, and at this juncture it suffices to say that neither Trump nor the rioters should even remotely be considered as mere anomalies to what is otherwise held up as the purportedly uplifting story of America's unique tryst with providential command. We are called upon to read the noose dangling from the gallows that was set up near the Capitol not only as an unimpeachable evidence of the design, over the course of 400 years, to terrorise Black people into abject submission but also as the noose that America has become around the rest of the world. One can only hope that the wretched scenes at the US Capitol will signal to the world that it is time to forget America. The world has had enough of America but the noose of its dream work may yet be the most formidable challenge to the future of humankind. ■

Vinay Lal is Professor of History and Asian American Studies, University of California, Los Angeles. He is the author of several books on politics and culture

THE WHITE

RICHA CHADHA IN *MADAM CHIEF MINISTER*

ADARSH GOURAV AND PRIYANKA CHOPRA IN *THE WHITE TIGER*

TIGERS

HINDI MOVIES THAT TALK DIRECTLY ABOUT CASTE OPPRESSION ARE STILL RARE. DESPITE RAMPANT SELF-CENSORSHIP, THAT MIGHT BE CHANGING

By Kaveree Bamzai

'In the olden days there were 1,000 castes and destinies. Now there are only two castes,' says Balram Halwai, a sweet-maker who wants to be a driver, in the movie version of Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger*. 'The ones with big bellies and the ones with small bellies. You eat or get eaten up.' There are other stray observations about caste throughout the Ramin Bahrani movie which talks about two Indias, that of darkness and of light. Life here is like a 'rooster coop'—most people know they will be eventually killed and devoured but they still strive endlessly. There is no game show here to set you free. Liberty comes, but only at a huge personal cost.

In many ways, Netflix's *The White Tiger* searingly echoes the subaltern survival theme of last year's *Serious Men* (based on the novel of the same name by Manu Joseph) where the Dalit hero is desperate to escape his straightjacketed life. He uses his son, a supposed prodigy, as the vehicle for his mobility; it seems a perfect embodiment of BR Ambedkar's slogan of 'Educate, Agitate, Organise'. He sees a simulated education as a shortcut out of the cycle of poverty, not realising that caste inequality is more deeply entrenched in India than meritocracy.

The same idea is put forth in the Amazon Prime Video series *Tandav* which is currently in the eye of a right-wing storm for its supposed insult to Hinduism. A prime minister tells a potential minister that he wouldn't even allow him to sit at the table with him if it wasn't for the compulsions of democracy. Another gent says, charmingly, that Dalit men love to date higher-caste women as a way to avenge centuries of '*atyaachar*' (oppression).

Hindi movies usually don't like to dwell on the harsh realities of life, and caste is the harshest of them all. Jyoti Nisha, a filmmaker/scholar who prefers the term 'Bahujan' over 'Dalit', says filmmakers of post-Independence India have been attempting to portray caste and identity but from the perspective of the state. In such a portrayal, cinema serves as nothing more than the role of an ideological state apparatus, bringing a Gandhian or a Brahminical view of the nation, in accordance with Hindu dogma. While Gandhi's view of the nation, she notes in an article in *Economic and Political Weekly*, is that of glorification of Indian villages, ignoring the realities of caste, Ambedkar presents a diametrically opposite view.

So, Nisha says, from *Achhut Kanya* (1936) to *Sujata* (1959), Dalits have always been portrayed as victims. *Achhut Kanya* was one of the first films to deal with the caste system—and both Himanshu Rai and Devika Rani (the lead actors) were adamant on making 'socially relevant cinema'. To Devika's credit, says biographer Kishwar Desai (*The Longest Kiss: The Life and Times of Devika Rani*), despite her cosmopolitan beauty, Devika successfully carried off the role playing a teenager even though she was 28 at the time. "It was one of her most successful roles and her effortless singing, her endearing innocence and fragility in her landmark village belle attire of a long *ghaghra* and *choli* won her many admirers, including Jawaharlal Nehru, who came to see the film and sat right next to her. She was convincing because Devika wanted to make a difference with her cinema—and this role of a doomed innocent young woman—despite her plucked eyebrows,

remarked upon by critics such as Baburao Patel, epitomised her desire," says Desai.

In both *Achhut Kanya* and *Sujata*, though, the Dalit woman has to sacrifice either herself or some aspect of herself to be deemed worthy of 'elevation'. When the marginalised Dalit woman refuses to be a victim and becomes an aggressor, as in Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1994), are we meant to pity her or admire her audacity? Mostly though, Hindi films have tended to steer clear of anything remotely controversial. "'*Hungama*' is a word we hear a lot," says Subhash Kapoor, who made *Guddu Rangeela*, a Dalit hero of his eponymous 2015 film. "Oh, there will be a *hungama* if we show this or do that. In *Guddu Rangeela*, I showed Arshad Warsi as a Dalit hero but with all the *latak*s and *jhatak*s [stylistic embellishments] of a Bollywood hero. He was battling *khap* panchayats, but that was not his only dimension," says Kapoor. The film didn't work, perhaps, says Kapoor, because it was dated in its narrative, but that didn't stop Kapoor from plunging into the world of caste politics again.

So here he is again with this week's release, *Madam Chief Minister*, where Richa Chadha plays a character based on Mayawati and J Jayalalithaa. Kapoor almost landed in hot water though by giving his leading lady a broom in the film's early poster. "We thought we were showing her empowerment, but clearly it was a misstep," he says. Moreover, now a storm is brewing about the casting of Chadha. Two incidents sparked off the idea for *Madam Chief Minister*. One was the mass sacking of staff at Poes Garden in 2012 because Jayalalithaa suspected she was being poisoned. The other was the death of Murtaza Bhutto in an encounter in 1996 when Benazir Bhutto, his sister, was prime minister of Pakistan. It showed how even Teflon women had a vulnerable side.

AARTI THAKORE IN *PAANCHIKA*

There are many stray observations about of darkness and of light. Life here is like a

Regional cinema tends to be truer to reality, discarding euphemisms and clichés. When the Marathi movie *Sairat* (2016), which told the story of an upper-caste girl who elopes with a lower-caste boy, was adapted into a Hindi movie, *Dhadak* (2018), caste was removed from the equation. In *The White Tiger*, caste is mentioned repeatedly but the focus is on class, the haves and the have nots. At its heart, says Mukul Deora, its producer, is a simple question: What does a man have to do to become free?

In *Article 15* (2019), Anubhav Sinha's dramatic retelling of the rape and murder of two girls in Uttar Pradesh, the urbane police officer is played by Ayushmann Khurrana. In a memorable scene, he asks his team their castes and learns of the distinctions even among Brahmins (which he is, though he is barely aware of it). The Dalit student leader who is trying to force the police to take note of the rape and murder of two Dalit girls is killed, the Brahmin hero lives on to fight another day. Tamil movies, in contrast, celebrate and elevate the Bahujan gaze. Take Pa Ranjith's *Kaala* (2018), starring Rajinikanth. Here Kaala is the overlord of Bhim *chawl*, which takes on Hari Abhyankar's Manu Builders. 'Bhim' refers to Ambedkar whereas Manu refers to *Manusmriti*, the ancient Hindu text which delineates the *varna* system. Kaala inverts the good-versus-evil dynamic, owning the Kaala of the title, in the colour scheme of Rajinikanth's character (all black), and dressing Nana Patekar's character (Hari Abhayankar) in all white. As Nisha Susan writes: 'Kaala consolidates the Bahujans in the Dharavi slum against an upper-caste politician, Abhayankar, who wants to occupy their lands. The film plays out in binaries, of white and black, of pure and impure, clean and dirty, national and anti-national.'

Audiences are ready now to embrace all sorts of colours,

SAIF ALI KHAN IN *TANDAV*

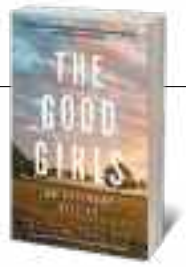
caste throughout *The White Tiger* which talks about two Indias, that rooster coop—most people know they will be devoured but they still strive

all sorts of reality, feels Kapoor. It is filmmakers who are too timid. After all, Jimmy Shergill's character Bhagwandas Mishra says in Anurag Kashyap's boxing saga, *Mukkabaaz* (2017): '*Hum saudaa nahin karte hain. Brahmin hain, aadesh dete hain* [We Brahmins do not negotiate, we order].' Told with vim and vigour, *Mukkabaaz* stood out for its politics—of caste and sport. '*Kisko salaam thokega? Kisko mukke se rokega?* [Whom will you salute? Whom will you stop with a punch?],' asks a song in *Mukkabaaz*. In many parts of India, the answer is still an accident of birth.

When filmmakers do break out of the tyranny of coyness and shoot from the heart, they can stand apart. Like Ankit Kothari, whose short film on casteism, *Paanchika*, was picked up as the opening film for the Indian Panorama (non-feature category) at the ongoing International Film Festival of India (January 16th-24th). "Society imposes its ideas on an individual and rewards the ones who follow it. When one cannot express individual will, it defeats the purpose of any type of society or structure. In *Paanchika*, the parents force their ideas about casteism on the two little girls. Deliberately staying away from the specifics of the incident, I was interested in exploring the individual will of these girls. How parents and society force them to follow the norm but friendship is what they truly stand for."

They are not to play, talk or even touch each other's shadow. The girls obey their parents yet find ways to follow their heart and reveal their true humanity. The absence of compassion comes through in Netflix's Tamil short-film anthology *Paava Kadhaigal*, where custodians of honour lie in wait for their offspring to err from the path designed for them. Caste and gender identities may have been imagined in a superficial way in the short films, but at least they are represented.

As of now though, diversity in Bollywood remains mostly an imported word. In 2019, *Masaan* director Neeraj Ghaywan put out a call on Twitter for assistant directors from Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi (DBA) backgrounds. In 2019, actress Niharika Singh started a three-month internship for DBA candidates. But when filmmakers rise above what aspiring politician Anuja Dharve calls the 'Dalit woman victim card' in *Serious Men*, true change would have begun. ■



THE GOOD GIRLS
AN ORDINARY KILLING
Sonia Faleiro

Hamish Hamilton
352 Pages | Rs 599

Back to Badaun

Sonia Faleiro's true crime reads like a thriller and tells of north India's many faultlines

By Bhavya Dore

ONE MAY DAY in 2014, two teenage girls were found hanging from a mango tree in Uttar Pradesh's Katra village. Family members last saw the cousins—belonging to the Shakya caste—the previous night before they went to relieve themselves in the nearby fields. They never returned. The discovery of the dead bodies the next day led to speculations of gangrape and murder. Hitting the headlines shortly after Narendra Modi first came to power, this became known as the Badaun case.

It seemed like the same old story wrapped up in a new headline; India was the worst place to be a woman.

Three men, from the more powerful Yadav caste, were initially arrested, along with two policemen. The victims' family also alleged the police had initially shown little interest in finding the girls when reported missing. Old caste dynamics became a primary fissure against which to first read the events.

The crime scene also became the heart of a spectacle, the village a staging ground for politicians keen to amass quick capital. The prime minister weighed in. Old statistics on India as a rape capital were dredged up. The story had metastasized from local horror to national tragedy.

By the time London-based writer and journalist Sonia Faleiro arrived in 2015, the actual events were deep in the past. But the long tail of the aftermath meant that much remained to be unfurled. Faleiro, who previously wrote *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance Bars* (2010), on Mumbai's bar dancers, spent four years working on this book. And it shows. Not a slapdash in-and-out approach, but a careful, deeply reported story drawing in a plethora of voices and from a mountain of documents, *The Good Girls: An Ordinary Killing* is a feat of narrative reporting. Faleiro expertly reconstructs both the incident itself, and everything that follows; the prevarications, the rumours, the tangle of mistruths and half-truths. The result is both a richly damning account of social mores and gender norms as it is of botched police conduct. Here, a former sweeper can conduct an autopsy and valuable evidence can lie unattended for hours.

Gangrape? Possible. Honour killing? Also, possible. At first it seems like familiar ground: the bad old rural north as the epicentre of violence where impoverished social conditions can result in deadly life chances for women. But while this jaded assumption about India seems like the book's starting point, it unfolds in variegated and unexpected ways.

Perhaps you recall from news reports how the episode unravelled, but I did not. So I won't say much more.

'True crime' as a genre is relatively new to India, but the output has been uneven and few titles have left a mark. In the West though, the category has become tainted by charges of cheap titillation and needless prurience. *Good Girls* might be classed as true crime, given the unexplained deaths at the heart of the book. But while it moves with the stealth and speed of a thriller, it is so much more than a crime story, and by the end, not really what we expected it to be at all. Sensitivity and close attention mark the storytelling and a determinedness grounds the reporting in ways that distinguish it from some of its lesser genre cousins. Accuracy does not suffer at the hands of pace, nor is ambiguity flattened.

There is one grating tic though. Too often the original Hindi quotes are used, then repeated in an English translation. For instance, we are told more than once of the 'promise of 'achhe din', 'good days". Or formulations such as 'Bheed kafi hai,' Ram Vilas muttered... There is quite a crowd.' Clearly this is meant to appeal to a non-Hindi speaking, probably global audience but the repetition and intermittent tone of Indiasplaining feels jarring at times. Still this is a minor quibble in a remarkable piece of nonfiction. ■

Sonia Faleiro

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

A Ridge Runs through It

A re-telling of Delhi's history from the vantage point of its green lung

By Ranjit Lal

ALAMY

Mehrauli ridge, Delhi

THE DELHI RIDGE has easily been the capital city's most prominent physical feature—beautiful, notorious, admired and exploited—a refuge for lovers, crooks and stoners, guarded by environmentalists and for long considered as Delhi's 'green lung'. It has played a major role in Delhi's history since time immemorial—right from when the first settlers and immigrants moved into the region (and much before the establishment of Indraprastha, which the present political dispensation believes is the start of history) to the present day. In his extensively researched and detailed book, Thomas Crowley excavates the Ridge's role in the life of Delhi's citizens, a task that took him 10 years. This is basically a re-telling of Delhi's history from the vantage point of the Ridge.

He covers every major facet in which the Ridge has affected the lives of Delhi's citizens, and how they have affected it: from the geology and soil, to the role of the state and politics and its ruthless exploitation for monetary gain. As also its role in providing refuge to a host of disparate characters, from the notorious macaques and invasive *Vilayti Keekar*, to nature lovers, drunks, criminals, and the spiritually and occult inclined.

Crowley gives us a 'Ridge's eye-view' of its role in Delhi's history. As the 'highest point' in Delhi it was used by every invader and ruler as a perfect location from which to defend the city: the massive fort in Tughlaqabad on the southern Ridge being one example, and the Flagstaff monument on the northern Ridge, as a symbol of British superiority another. Invaders hacked down the 'forest' while others planted trees to develop hunting parks.

Its quartzite rocks and stones have been mined and quarried for the very construction of the capital; for example, Badarpur's famous 'sand' is from the Ridge. Its trees were cut for wood and land cleared for agriculture, and pastoralists have long let their goats and cattle roam free within its precincts: Crowley has a special sympathy for these, the 'gujjars', maintaining that perhaps they knew best how to exploit the forest in a sustainable way. (Their livelihood depended on it.) In more modern times, the Ridge has become a goldmine for property developers, who buy up the land from villagers cheaply and then reap millions with their exorbitant towers and malls.

All through the book, one thing becomes clear: Crowley is firmly on the side of what he perceives as the poor and exploited—those who have had relatively little impact on the Ridge, but have depended on it for their livelihood. It's always them that get bulldozed and shunted to the outskirts of the city, while the rich build luxury 'farmhouses'. He points out the 'environmental hypocrisy' involved in encouraging cars on the one hand and bemoaning the pollution in the city on the other. The rich come through as the main villains of the piece as do venal politicians and rulers (the British included), of every ruling dispensation, with special mention of the present one. City planners have long battled with environmentalists over the subject of turning the Ridge into a sanitised 'park' or letting it remain wild and tangled.

He has a soft corner for those regarded as outcasts—the marginalised who inhabit and wander about the remoter regions of the Ridge. The happy *ganja*-fogged Nath yogis and sadhus on the southern Ridge, the lovers on the northern Ridge, and even has a good word to say of the invasive *Vilayti Keekar* (*Prosopis juliflora*). The Ridge's notorious population of rhesus macaques is again caught in a schizophrenic bind: while being venerated by a major section of the population, it is persecuted by others.

This exhaustively researched book is a must-read for anyone interested in Delhi—and its tumultuous relationship with its most prominent physical asset—the Ridge. ■

FRACTURED FOREST, QUARTZITE CITY
A HISTORY OF DELHI AND ITS RIDGE
Thomas Crowley

Yoda, Sage & Select
350 Pages | Rs 795

The Indian Masala Magic

Recipes don't matter once you understand the science of flavours

By Shylashri Shankar

IF YOU ENJOY composing and carrying out culinary experiments either on others or on yourself, and if you are one of those who has Harold McGee's *On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen* in your bookcase, then Krish Ashok's *Masala Lab: The Science of Indian Cooking* is for you. In the 883-page tome by McGee, precisely two boxes (on fermented legumes that make *idli* and *dosa*, and on milk sweets and *paneer*) and two pages (on the maturation of spice flavours through roasting) mention Indian cooking. What about the different culinary methods and lore of thousands of communities in India? How can maximum flavour be extracted in the minimum amount of time from vegetables and meats simmered with spices and gravy? Can you cook *chana* or *rajma* quickly in a microwave without soaking them overnight? Answers to these and other questions are in *Masala Lab*, a saviour of previously occasional but now full-time cooks (thanks to Covid) like me.

Krish Ashok, a software engineer by training and a cooking and science afficionado by temperament, aims to explain the food science of Indian dishes in simple non-technical terms. His long-term goal is 'to encourage everyone to experiment with newer methods of cooking Indian food' and document the 'stunning variety of cooking methods' beyond mere recipes.

My expectations from the book were threefold. First, I wanted tips and shortcuts on creating the maximum flavour in the minimum amount of time one needs to spend in the kitchen. Second, I wanted to understand the science underlying these tips so that I could use it to experiment with other ways of cooking these dishes. Third, I wanted to figure out my misconceptions and stop those habits. Ashok delivers on all three in simple and clear prose.

Let's begin with the tip on making *chhole*. I microwaved the cup of unsoaked raw *chana* with water for 20 minutes on a low setting. Then let it rest for 20 minutes, and then pressure cooked it with a tea bag, baking soda and salt. The tea bag absorbed the unused baking soda and removed the soapy taste. While there are no instructions about the amount of time the cooker required, I found it needed to be cooked longer (for 40 minutes or so) than when it is soaked overnight. Then I fried the masala separately (onion, tomato, pomegranate powder, etcetera) and added it to the *chana* in the pressure cooker and cooked it for one more whistle. The *chana* and gravy looked dark and right. The taste was okay but the real intensity of flavour developed overnight in the fridge and the next day it tasted like the Bengali Market *chana* (the Pope of all *chanas*). So, yes, science works but for the complex flavour of a Punjabi *chhole*, the *chana* needs to marinate in the spices for a few hours. The Moti Mahal cookbook advises precisely that—to soak *chana* overnight, boil it and then marinate the boiled *chana* for a few hours in pomegranate powder, coriander powder, chilli powder, ginger paste and salt, and then cook it on a low flame for 40 minutes with the *chana* water. However, the whole Moti Mahal process, while scientifically accurate in terms of extracting the maximum flavour, takes a long time. *Masala Lab's* suggestions significantly reduced the actual time I spent in the kitchen. So, a big tick mark for this experiment.

Another tip that works is browning the ingredients separately before adding them to the gravies. Though it is time-consuming, it does enhance the flavour thanks to the Maillard reaction (which Ashok explains as the process whereby the sugars in carbohydrates and amino acids in proteins are converted into an unstable molecule which rearranges itself into super-flavourful molecules). This tip is also in McGee's book. I had always wondered about the rolled *papads* in restaurants, and now after I rolled a raw *papad* around a glass and microwaved it, I know why. It avoids creating dead spots (read about it on page 158).

Another handy tip is to steam the vegetables, brown them and then mix with the gravy. Steaming is better than boiling them in salted water, and that is better than cooking it together with the gravy and spices from the start. This works. The cauliflower had a buttery and intense flavour while the peas tasted deliciously sweet. Tastier than if it had been cooked from the start in the tawa with all the spices. I would add a caveat here. Steaming is great if you are not using too many spices and gravy and if you are working with organic vegetables. But don't bother with the non-organic kind which has little taste and needs to be smothered with spicy gravy. Here, one must pause and examine Ashok's provocative assertion that Indian cooking is about techniques and spices rather than the ingredient. If you are cooking dishes with gravy or a large array of spices, then perhaps the ingredient may not matter as much. But for dishes where the spice profile is very simple such as using black pepper, salt, ginger and mustard or *jeera* seeds, the ingredient, I think, is very important.

The misconceptions aspect shows up in chapter five. MSG, which most of us who've grown up eating Chinese food and

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

KRISH ASHOK MAKES A GREAT START FOR INDIAN DISHES. HIS EMPHASIS ON COOKING TECHNIQUES TO EXTRACT FLAVOUR WORKS WELL FOR INDIAN DISHES WHERE ONE CAN'T REALLY PLAY AROUND WITH THE SPICE PROFILE AND CREATE THE SAME DISH

then drinking tonnes of hot tea or water now avoid, is pure umami flavour, says Ashok. He suggests that since umami amplifies saltiness and sweetness, a good way to reduce salt and sugar intake (which more and more Indians are being advised to do to reduce the risk of heart problems and diabetes) is to use small amounts of MSG in the dishes. Another misconception is using lemon juice or vinegar in meats to enhance the flavour. Turns out that acids make the meat tougher, but if you add a pinch of baking soda to mutton or beef and let it sit for five minutes, the meat will become tender. And, if you want something to brown quickly, then add a pinch of baking soda and it will hasten the process (example very crispy potatoes—I can vouch for this). I also did not know that we can only taste things that are water-soluble but the flavour molecules of most spices are not water-soluble. They need hot oil or alcohol. Here, Ashok introduces us to the idea of using a splash of alcohol before you add water for the gravy. Cheap wine, vodka, brandy or rum will do. I tried vodka with an aubergine cooked with onions, garlic, ginger, tomato and chilli powder, and it created more depth in the taste but also brought it closer to the Mediterranean version.

Researchers who have examined the flavour techniques of Indian dishes have pointed out that the flavour profiles of each dish are unique. This means you can't substitute one spice for another because it will change the dish into something else. So using science in the Indian context is different from a North American or Western European one where such substitutions can occur and where multiple spices are used to enhance a particular flavour. Harold McGee tackled that subject for those geographies in his magnum opus. Ashok makes a great start for Indian dishes. His emphasis on cooking techniques to extract flavour works well for Indian dishes where one can't really play around with the spice profile and create the same dish. Adding tomato paste or ketchup to raw tomatoes will intensify its flavour, he says. Use it in the *dal tadka*, he says. I did, and it certainly created an interesting taste that I liked but not the others in my family who were accustomed to the non-ketchup *tadka*.

This brings up another interesting assertion in the book—that recipes don't matter once you understand the science of flavours. Chapter seven is titled 'Burn the Recipe' where Ashok promises to liberate us from the chaos of recipes by providing metamodels for rice, bread, gravy, chutney and *raita*. These are useful and can, for instance, produce fluffy rice or a great biryani. However, if one sees a recipe as a unique voice creating a nuanced flavour, then to recreate that uniqueness, you have to follow the recipe exactly as it is written. Think of a recipe like a book. Student kills moneylender (this would be a meta model). But this can be written like a potboiler by an easily forgotten writer and like a masterpiece—*Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky. This is where recipes are important. For instance, adding tomato ketchup to the *dal tadka*, while creating a delicious flavour, also changed the voice of the *dal*. For my family, it became pulp fiction (which I like) rather than a remembrance of things past.

While some parts of the book are a bit repetitive (example about the uses of baking soda, MSG and alcohol), how often can you say that you tasted a book and had great fun doing so? *Masala Lab* is a useful reference book too which charts out the flavour molecules and pairings of the spices we use in our dishes, the basic gravy and biryani algorithms, and for the more adventurous, the temperature and time taken to *sous vide* meats and vegetables.

What we need next, perhaps, from Ashok is a set of recipes (not algorithms) that use these science-proven tips to create flavour bombs. Now if you will excuse me, I am off to experiment with using beer to make cheese. ■

STARGAZER

KAVEREE BAMZAI

The Star and Actor

Change was inevitable in Bollywood and 2020 accelerated it. It has stripped many in Bollywood of their mystique and no one more so than star makers and their protégés. Case in point: movie studio czars like Aditya Chopra and Karan Johar. Ayushmann Khurrana and Ranveer Singh are both managed by YRF Talent but while Ranveer was always treated like a 'star', Ayushmann was considered a mere 'actor'. Yet, with a string of hits since *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* in 2015, Ayushmann with his script sense and sincerity, is standing taller than their favourite star today. With *Bareilly Ki Barfi* and *Shubh Mangal Saavdhan* in 2017, *Badhaai Ho* and *Andhadhun* in 2018, *Article 15*, *Dream Girl* and *Bala* in 2019 and *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* in 2020, he has been embraced wholeheartedly by audiences. These modestly budgeted films made money at the box office too, making Ayushmann a great return on investment. Plus, he was the first big star to embrace the reality of streaming during the pandemic, with *Gulabo Sitabo* doing well on Amazon Prime Video. Contrast this with the last three years for Ranveer where he has had Bollywood's biggest—Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Rohit Shetty and Zoya Akhtar—fashioning three formulaic star vehicles for him, packaging him and proclaiming him as the next superstar. Yet, today an Ayushmann film, without the frills and flounces of designer stardom, excites audiences much more. This is the new order of stardom.

Alia's Problem

Alia Bhatt has a problem. Should she go to Dharma Cornerstone, the new talent agency set up by her mentor Karan Johar in conjunction with Bunty Sajdeh (whose Cornerstone handles Virat Kohli, among others)? Or stay with Matrix, set up by Reshma Shetty, which has done a good job handling her interests so far? Johar's agency joins a crowded field which also has YRF Talent, Spice and Kwan. Salman Khan's Uniworld Being Talented (UBT) has already posed a similar problem for Katrina Kaif who is represented by Matrix. Her sister Isabelle is among those represented by Salman's agency. In an industry where power is judged by the stars one can collect on one's roster, loyalties will be severely tested. Last year, Kareena Kapoor Khan left Matrix to follow her personal agent Poonam Damania when she set up her own agency, Versis, and extended it into a partnership with Harshad Chavan of TOAST Events.

Attlee's Out

After a two-year hiatus, Shah Rukh Khan is making news as much for what he is shooting as for what he is not. Fans of the actor were delighted at a possible collaboration with Tamil director Attlee (who has delivered hits such as *Mersal* in 2017 and *Bigil* in 2019) where he was slated to play a double role as a criminal and police officer. It's not happening now, unfortunately. The superstar is expected to complete shooting *Pathan* with Siddharth Anand by the end of March. So if not Attlee, will he shoot Rajkumar Hirani's social satire on immigration next?

Star Power

How filmmakers in India measure stardom is a mystery. Take *Bhoot Police*, a horror comedy starring Saif Ali Khan. Ali Fazal, who will soon be seen in the Agatha Christie mystery as Cousin Andrew in the Kenneth Branagh-directed *Death on the Nile*, was supposed to be the second lead, before he was abruptly replaced by Arjun Kapoor. Kapoor, whose last hit *Half Girlfriend* was in 2017, has had a spotty record at the box office since then. Fazal's last theatrical hit was *Fukrey Returns*, also in 2017, but two seasons of *Mirzapur* on Amazon Prime Video have made him a big OTT star. So what is the secret of Arjun Kapoor's success? A tabloid-trending girlfriend like Malaika Arora and occasional appearances on *Koffee with Karan*?

Unhappy Threesome

Anyone who dates Kartik Aaryan has now come to the conclusion that a date with him involves an uninvited guest, the paparazzi. The actor has a tendency to date his co-stars, an old-fashioned way of publicising movies, but the actresses, starting with Sara Ali Khan, are surprised with the frequency with which supposedly private dates get splashed in newspapers thanks to strategic tip-offs to the paparazzi.

Did You Know?

Vivek Gomber and Shahana Goswami are all set to play a married couple once again after Mira Nair's *A Suitable Boy*. Actor-producer Gomber, whose *Sir* is currently winning hearts on Netflix, will be playing a banker as will Goswami in Alankrita Shrivastava's forthcoming series *Bombay Begums*, set in the city's financial world. ■

RP - Sanjiv Goenka Group

spencer's

STOP BY AT ANY OF OUR STORES OR JUST ORDER AT YOUR FINGERTIPS NOW!

Spencer's now brings more reasons to come closer to you!! Drop in at any of our stores or order from the comfort of your home. Log in to our App, choose your products or simply call us, place your order and get it delivered at your doorstep.

We are open across all Stores!

Click & Order

Shop Online @ www.spencers.in

DOWNLOAD THE APP

*T&C Apply

FREE HOME DELIVERY*

*On purchase of ₹499 & above

- 25000+ PRODUCTS AT YOUR FINGERTIPS
- CONVENIENT SHOPPING EXPERIENCE
- EXPRESS DELIVERY
- FREE HOME DELIVERY ABOVE ₹499
- EASY PAYMENT OPTIONS

Fruits & Vegetables | Dairy | Processed Foods | Groceries | Personal Care | Home Needs

*T&C apply. Images shown here are for representation only, actual product may differ in appearance. Spencer's reserves the right to withdraw, change or modify the T&C as well as offers/prices without any prior notice. All the offers communicated will be offered as value discounts to the customers invoice. All products may not be available online. Spencer's Retail Limited is proposing, subject to receipt of requisite approvals, market conditions and other considerations, a rights issue of its equity shares in the near future and is in the process of filing a letter of offer with the stock exchanges and with SEBI.

Customer Care No. 1800 103 0134 Follow us on

RP - Sanjiv Goenka Group

saregama

MUSIC
— MEETS —
PODCAST

SAREGAMA

CARVAAN™ 2.0

AVAILABLE AT SAREGAMA.COM